Walkabout Ten Years Later: Searching for a Renewed Vision of Education

by Maurice Gibbons

It is easy to become so steeped in the ideas of traditional schooling that we fail to acknowledge new approaches to teaching and learning. A decade after the appearance of his celebrated article that started the Walkabout movement, Mr. Gibbons reawakens us to the possibilities created by a totally new conception of schooling.

THIS MORNING I watched the sun rise and was reminded again how relentlessly the mind clings to the apparent and familiar and how perilous such blindness can be. Dawn is a slow and meditative process and, in its daily reenactment

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of creation, a fine metaphor for thought-ful reexamination and discovery. As I watched, first light separated sky from land; then the sun, like a brilliant lamp being raised over the window sill of a dark-ened room, rose gradually over the hills and, flooding the inlet in front of me with its illumination, set its course westward across the sky. This is what I saw — and, despite my education to the contrary, these are the words I used to describe the event.

Then I suddenly realized that I was seeing with 15th-century eyes and thinking geocentric thoughts. If I, in the age of Apollo and Challenger, still stumbled into thoughts of the sun rising, how radical and unlike my 16th-century counterparts must have found the inescapable truth that they stood not at the center of the cosmos with the sun revolving around them, but instead on a mere satellite circling the sun — that the sun does not rise; rather, the earth turns to reveal the sun standing fixed in the sky. What trauma I would have experienced in their place. My training, my experience, my intuitions, my beliefs, the truths I shared with others, my place in the universe — all confirmed each day by simply watching the dawn — now shattered forever.

This is a dramatic illustration of the staggering difficulties we face in making the shift from one paradigm of thought and practice to another. We are required to accept not only a new idea or habit pattern but a whole new perspective on the world and the way we function in it. Yet history is a record of just such revolutionary changes. The existing paradigm dominates for a while. Criticisms, contradictory evidence, and suggested alternatives arise, but they are easily deflected by the authority of established belief and the sheer immovable weight of what is. Who, immersed in the system of a given era, could judge that it would be changed forever by an arrow, a telescope, a printing press, or an idea?

With conditions as they are in education, it seems that we are in just that position ourselves: so deeply steeped in traditional schooling that we are oblivious to the tide of effects pressing us toward a new paradigm of teaching and learning. This seems to us a most improbable time for dramatic change.

Yet the evidence of change is certainly gathering — much of it distressing not only to me, but to most of my colleagues in postsecondary institutions and in the public schools. As the expectations for education increase, our capacity to respond seems to decrease. With shrinking budgets and enrollments, there are fewer and fewer of us facing larger and larger classes, presenting slimmer and slimmer programs plagued by constantly diminish-
We seem unable to incorporate into our schools the idea of the new literacy, learning how to learn for a lifetime.

In addition to the decline in the education profession, the rise of powerful alternatives to public schooling, and the changing social context of education, there are the continuing failures of the old paradigm, now so familiar that they seem more the effects of inescapable than ill effects for which we can reasonably be held accountable. We seem to have great difficulty moving beyond the teaching of a fixed body of information in a fixed routine of present-practice-test that relies largely on textbooks, workbooks, and worksheets. We seem unable to address the processes of thinking, creating, and acting; to stimulate inquiry and participation; to transform students' abilities to function in the world.

Certainly, we seem unable to address such ends in the many dynamic and powerful ways that are available to us. And our fixed process fails to meet the challenge of individual differences. We know that students vary greatly in their abilities, skills, interests, and experiences and that these differences increase with age; yet we have been unable to accommodate uniqueness and to capitalize on it in classroom learning. All students still study basically the same lessons and end up in about the same place at the end of the year. Equal opportunity, perhaps — but at a staggering cost to the nation in untapped talents. In our competitive system, only grades reflect differences among students. Although success is our goal, we have managed to teach failure equally well and with devastating effects that are completely contrary to our mission.

Our continued emphasis on the mastery of assigned information also separates the inner drives of students — their energies, attitudes, values, curiosities, ideas, needs — from the task of learning. And as we teach over the years the knowledge and skills we choose to have students learn, we diminish their own drives and increase their dependence on the school for the preparation of students to cope with learning how to learn for a lifetime.

The crises we face in education abound — more now, perhaps, than ever before. But in crisis there is always opportunity. This may be our moment on the crest of the wave, when we can choose to be crushed by that wave or to use its energy for a long, skillful, and exciting ride. Each of the depressing circumstances we face offers a challenge to change and a guide to the transformation of the educational enterprise. It is worthy but insufficient to speak of minimum competencies and stiffer course requirements. We need a vision not of adequacy, but of excellence. We need a source of pride, not simply less embarrassment. And we need an opportunity to proceed passionately in the conviction that we are making a profound and beneficial difference in the lives of our students and in the lives of the communities we serve. The risk of change has never been greater, nor has the need for a new vision. Perhaps now, more than ever, we are able to look on our task with fresh eyes; to see that the sun does not rise, but the earth turns; to see that the route to excellence lies not in less money, and with greater client satisfaction than the schools?"
room lessons. Although the sun rises daily on thousands of schools where this is an indisputable reality, let me invite you to sponge your vision clean and to look with fresh eyes on another possibility, in which students learn the skills of making their own educational decisions and following their own educational programs. Permit me to go beyond inviting you to suspend conviction and disbelief. Let me invite you to become, for this interlude, an advocate of the new paradigm, applying your own experience, knowledge, and imagination to the task of conceptualizing a dramatic shift in the purpose and practice of public education.

This is an incredible task. We have been taught by the old paradigm, we have been trained to work effectively in it, we have a wealth of experience applying it, and we have an enormous personal investment in efforts to make it work well. Our purpose now is not to deny the value of that background, but to search for a promising pathway leading forward from it. As a temporary advocate, resist the temptation to look into familiar alternatives. This is not, for example, an attempt to proselytize for principles of permissive education; rather, it is a search for a new rigor, a new route to excellence. As advocates, let us not think merely of new classroom practices fitted into patterns of management designed for the existing paradigm. Management always prevails. Our task is to design a complete and integrated system of educational practice in the new paradigm. If in the end your advocacy fades, much will still have been gained, for you will have looked at another paradigm as positively as possible and confirmed your faith in the power of the existing one. And if your advocacy does not fade, we may have begun to shape in shadowy outline a new paradigm that we can work toward with renewed hope, pride, and passion.

Let us begin with a stark proposition that puts our task in perspective. Let us propose that, as a result of their public education a highly desirable alternative that meets the challenge of new technology, enables students to deal with a rapidly changing society and workplace, and prepares them to deal with the incredible national and global problems we now face. In addition, our paradigm must teach higher-order skills through high-impact teaching methods, develop the talents of all individuals as fully as possible, cultivate social skills and responsibility, encourage students to develop their inner drives and express them through their learning activities, and insures that students are well-equipped for a lifetime of learning. Challenging tasks all, they are the real challenges we face.

Our purpose is to create a pattern of competence for all students, one that will affect everything else that they do.

The center of this new paradigm must be a process that enables students to design and manage their own learning. The process must be eminently practical, adaptable to all grade levels, and appropriate for use throughout life. The following process meets those criteria and provides a core on which to build. By teaching students to carry out this process and to master the many skills that are involved, we lay a foundation that will ultimately enable them to develop their own learning activities.

The process that I propose has five parts: 1) goal-setting — reviewing the choices for learning, making decisions about what is important to learn, and setting a clear goal to pursue; 2) strategic planning — outlining exactly what has to be learned and accomplished, selecting those methods of learning that are appropriate for the task and for one's learning style, and organizing a plan of action for achieving the goal; 3) self-management — learning to organize and manage time and effort by recognizing and solving such personal problems as disorder and lack of self-discipline, when they arise, and by securing the resources necessary for implementing the learning plan; 4) self-evaluation — determining in advance what would constitute a high-quality learning outcome, seeking and using information about one's success, and making a final judgment about one's success; and 5) review — looking back over what was learned and achieved, considering what worked well and what didn't (in order to focus on key improvements in the next cycle), and only then making decisions about the next goal and endeavor.

This process can be introduced in a simple form with an easy task at any level of schooling. As students progress, they can apply the process to tasks of increasing complexity and duration, until eventually they are designing and carrying out major portions of their own learning programs. In the years following school, the process will still be appropriate for learning and doing, for personal and professional development, and for strategic planning in business, industry, and government. It is the basic process for effective action and continuous improvement. As such, this process is an appropriate core for our new paradigm.

Let us imagine for a moment that we are working in the new paradigm. Our task is to teach our students to set their own goals, to design their own plans for achieving these goals, to organize and manage their own activities, to judge how well they did, and then to review the whole process and decide which changes they can make the next time to be more effective and better satisfied with their learning outcomes. Some of our students' goals will be in required areas of study; others will be in self-chosen fields.

Let us also imagine that we are dealing with four specific students: Tom, a restless, average student who is as used to adventuring and mischief as his namesake, Tom Sawyer; Daisy, a wilted flower who is so accustomed to failure and rejection that she seldom speaks; Kevin, who is bright and businesslike and likes to be told what to do, so that he can do it well; and Donna, who is popular, witty, and — unknown to her peers — musically talented. In attempting to teach the process of designing and managing their own learning to this sample of students, what would we discover about the nature of our new task?

The first thing likely to strike us would be the magnitude of the job we have undertaken. Just teaching students to use the process is much more complex than it seems. Each step involves so many skills. Goal-setting, for instance, involves identifying choices, deciding among them, setting a worthwhile and achievable goal, and stating it clearly. Moreover, when students begin their activities, it is a challenge...
just to supervise them, because the activities are so bewilderingly diverse.

We will also note a radical change in our teaching role, which will shift from presenter of content to coach of our students’ performance. In the new paradigm we have to somehow inform, train, guide, counsel, and inspire students in ways that help them become excellent at what they decide to learn and do. Our new role places greater responsibility on the students. In teaching students the self-directing process, we are saying, “You have a major responsibility for what you learn here. We will show you how and give you all the training, practice, and support that we can — but learning is your job, now and throughout your life.” Early in the game, as students discover the magnitude of this new responsibility, many of them will lose their way. Helping them get themselves back on the path will challenge us in our new coaching role.

In teaching the process of self-direction, we will also be struck by the uniqueness of individual students, expressed in the activities they choose and in their struggles and progress. We see Tom’s struggle to trust himself and the situation and to focus his attention and efforts, Daisy’s struggle to overcome her fears of being exposed once again as a failure, Kevin’s struggle with frustration over not being assigned a specific task at which he can shine and win approval, and Donna’s struggle to acknowledge and work toward expectations of success, we must also allow students access to as many appropriate learning opportunities as possible, as well as to as many appropriate learning environments as possible. In other words, by teaching our students to function successfully as self-directed learners, we are also teaching them to serve them well in other spheres.

To set personally important goals, for example, students must have inner clarity, not confusion, about who they are, what they do well, what they value, and what they wish to become. When they engage in strategic planning, students need confidence that they can take the initiative, make things happen, and experience success. Similarly, self-management of activities requires determination and self-regulation, not self-doubt and lack of inner control. Meanwhile, self-evaluation requires that students be open to evidence about their progress and willing to change in the light of this evidence. Finally, redefining their efforts as a guide to future activities requires that students be willing to reflect on past actions and to think about the meaning and significance of things.

In our new role as coaches, we are encouraging not only the performance of self-directed activities, but the development of these inner states as well. When performance and inner state are in harmony, students will make better progress. For instance, Daisy will progress most rapidly when she develops confidence and establishes a pattern of achievement to confirm it.

O NOW WE have a potentially powerful process of self-direction that is made even more powerful by its association with appropriate inner states. It is time to ask, What means can we use to cultivate the development of this twofold process of self-direction, how can we organize a program that uses these means for cumulative effect, and what kind of support system can we put in place to sustain the operation of this program?

First, what means can we use to develop the twofold process of self-direction? We begin by helping students to identify and clarify their own intentions and by helping them to accept the fact that the locus of control and responsibility for decisions about their learning and progress resides in them, not in outside agencies. They need to know what the choices are, what talents and interests they have in different fields of learning, and where the expectations of others end and their own expectations begin. As students’ intentions emerge, we can make these intentions vivid by teaching students to visualize and then helping them to create visions of the future as they desire it to be. With vivid mental pictures of themselves as they want to be, doing what they want to be able to do, and feeling as they want to feel about themselves, students sink a hook into a future that they can reel themselves toward. With the line thus drawn, they can set immediate and realistic goals for progress in the short term — but always urged on by the hope of attaining that longer-range vision they desire.

When Daisy identifies her interest in horses, for instance, we can also help her develop a vision of how she wants to relate to them — perhaps as someone expert in their care and training. Similarly, Tom may find focus in a vision of himself as a scuba diver working on salvage operations. Kevin may be able to take ownership of his own intentions, once he has a vivid vision of himself as a successful doctor. And Donna may visualize herself as a performer who sings and plays her own songs — a vision that transforms her vague interest in music into a clearly formed goal to pursue.

Even though students are pursuing both their own goals and assigned goals in other fields within the school program, the shaping and pursuit of their own undistracted intentions is essential in this paradigm. Our purpose is to create a pattern of competence and success for all students, one that will affect everything else that they do. Once students have formed such personal visions, we can communicate to them our expectations of their success and help them to develop positive self-fulfilling prophecies of their own.

But if we encourage students to create these highly individual and widely diverse expectations of success, we must also allow them the freedom to restructure their efforts to achieve these visions. This means giving students access to as wide a range of optional ways to learn as possible, as well as access to as many appropriate learning processes.
contexts or environments as possible. By opening up the possibilities for learning to include all the ways available to us (and there are at least 100), we open many routes to achievement, we enable students to plan sequences of learning activities adapted to their interests and preferred learning styles, and we familiarize them with the ways to learn that will be available to them throughout life. In the process, we may even cultivate their relish for learning. They may choose to learn, for example, by consulting an expert, establishing a pattern of appropriate practice, studying on their own using all the available resources, setting up an experiment, arranging on-the-job experiences, observing and reflecting, teaching others, or designing a challenging action project.

To exercise many of these options, students have to be able to work in contexts other than the classroom and to use the resources of the school, the community, urban and wilderness environments, and, where possible, the world beyond. For instance, Daisy may learn from a mentor at a stable, race track, or veterinary hospital. Kevin may conduct research in a library, a laboratory, or a physician's office. Tom may take a special course or workshop on diving offered by another institution. Donna may observe and consult with professional musicians but develop her own pattern of practice and composing. A student learning to be a restaurateur may work as a volunteer or employee in a cafeteria, and a student learning to speak a foreign language may regularly spend time in conversation with an immigrant family. Such single activities are only one part of the overall strategic plan that each student is developing. But these activities illustrate the wide range of learning options and locations we need to make available, in order to increase the opportunities for all students to experience success.

Meanwhile, the teachers should employ high-impact instructional techniques. Among the most powerful of such techniques is modeling; as teachers, we should model for students the importance of the process of self-direction in our own daily lives. Applying such procedures as strategic planning to the real-life concerns of students is another high-impact instructional technique. Placing students in the company of significant and admired people also has a strong impact, as does the appropriate support and involvement of parents, peers, and the community as a whole. Other such methods include establishing cooperative learning teams, demonstrating new skills and processes, coaching students in their practice of these skills and processes, teaching students to mentally rehearse and role-play new behaviors, and introducing students to new and intense experiences.

Somewhere, for each of us, there is an unforgettable, inspiring experience or pattern of experiences that opens to us the best that we are or might be. This paradigm is designed to give students and teachers wider opportunities to seek such peak learning events and to find them. We might arrange for Daisy to be present at the birth of a foal, for Kevin to be admitted to a hospital operating room to witness an important surgical procedure, for Donna to hear and meet a talented singer, and for Tom to spend a day on the job with a diving team.

The intensity of all of these methods is increased when we introduce the factor of challenge. Students become accustomed to controlled effort; however, when we regularly challenge them to challenge themselves, we encourage them to set demanding goals and to take on demanding tasks that plunge them into new experiences or propel them toward new levels of performance. Such challenges pose the risk of failure, but they also have the potential of yielding outcomes in which students can take great pride. Just as the track star raises the high-jump bar or the researcher sets out to understand a perplexing phenomenon, so does the aspiring archaeologist plan a field trip to the nearby ruins of a long-deserted Indian village.

In the same way, Daisy may take responsibility for treating a sick horse and thus win her mentor's approval; Kevin may teach anatomy to a group of younger students; Tom may make his first dive in open water; and Donna may make a tape of her first song. By learning to challenge themselves, students learn to confront the limitations that restrain them and to reach for their best performances. Each time they rise to new plateaus, they will look out on still wider vistas of possibilities.

As students begin to enact their plans and challenges, they will soon confront the need to manage their individual activities in an organized fashion. They may need training in time management, practice in such skills as contacting adults for information, coaching in how to secure and organize the resources they need, and counseling on how to deal with such problems as failures of self-discipline and determination. If the temptation is to rescue them from their dilemmas, the task is to help them rescue themselves.

Finally, if students set up diverse programs with unique outcomes, they need a wide range of appropriate ways to demonstrate their achievements. If they have challenged themselves to accomplish difficult tasks, they deserve opportunities to demonstrate what they have done in the best possible light and to celebrate the deed — and be celebrated for it. The many ways to demonstrate achievement besides test scores and term papers include testimonials, certificates, photographic records, displays of products, performances, observations by others, and case histories.

For instance, Daisy's mentor may write a letter or personally testify to her achievements.
ment; Tom may present a diving certificate or bring the equipment to school and demonstrate its use; Kevin may give a lecture; and Donna may give a live performance. The intensity of anticipating the demonstration and the reward of completing it successfully both increase as the audience for the demonstration expands from the teacher alone to the class, the school, or the community. The celebration that follows, whether large or small, acknowledges the student and his or her achievement. Such recognition reinforces the student's effort and cultivates a future of continued accomplishment.

NOW THE shadowy outline of teaching and learning in the new paradigm begins to appear. We can see students becoming skilled in the systematic planning process. We can see them enacting their plans, overcoming difficulties, and accumulating successes. We can see them becoming clearer about their intentions, more confident and determined, more open to change, and more thoughtful about the direction that this change should take.

As these waves of change appear, we sense also the tidal developments that accompany them. We see that we are not just preparing students to develop a curriculum, but to develop as people. We are not just cultivating their clear intentions, but nurturing their personal search for meaning. We are not just developing their confidence in their ability to enact their plans, but fostering the certainty that they can legitimately pursue excellence in whatever they choose to do. We see that we are not just encouraging them to complete what they start, but showing them that they can shape their lives and make a difference in the world around them.

But how can we manage a program such as I have just described? As teachers, what procedures can we use to organize, guide, monitor, evaluate, and support the diverse activities in which our students will be engaged? What kind of program can we design for the first 11 years of schooling that will gradually prepare our students to meet the challenge of the final year? And what kind of management system can we put in place to insulate the larger context in which teachers and students operate will support the new approach, not confound it?

First, let us look at some ways of managing student learning that also contribute to the development of students as self-directed learners. The new paradigm depends on a balance between reflection and action. This balance can be developed through the working journal or through some similar device. In the working journal students record what they are learning, explore their talents and budding interests, examine the struggles they are facing, describe their emerging visions of what they want to accomplish and in what ways they wish to be different, tell the stories of their experiences, and outline the ideas they are beginning to shape. The working journal is not only a record of the student’s personal journey toward responsible, self-directed maturity, but also a means of shaping that journey. From this recorded reflection, the student’s goals and plans emerge.

In order to help students transform their reflections into strategies for action, the teacher can show them how to write formal proposals, contracts, or plans that outline what they intend to do and how they intend to do it. With a detailed plan of action in hand, a student can negotiate his or her proposal with the teacher and, perhaps, with a parent or other adult who will be involved. This negotiation enables the teacher to consult with the student, to confirm the student's intentions, to offer appropriate assistance, and to protect the student from dangerous risks. But always the prevailing spirit will be to confirm and enhance, not to rescue and control. In the pursuit of a personal goal, failure is another opportunity to learn and a guide to future decisions.

The plan then becomes the student’s agenda for action, and the teacher’s record of mutually negotiated agreements becomes a reference for monitoring the student’s progress. Beginners who are developing plans for brief activities may simply state an intention and a procedure. Later, students may be required to negotiate detailed proposals that deal with all aspects of the strategic planning process, from vision and goal to demonstration and celebration.

With a plan of action approved, the student turns to identifying and securing the necessary resources for getting the activity under way. The teacher (or an aide) can help by developing a catalogue of available resources — people, equipment, sites, experiences — and categorizing these resources for filing in a cabinet or on a computer disk. This catalogue gives the student an overview of available resources from which to select those that are appropriate for his or her plan. This catalogue of resources is especially helpful in the beginning, before the student begins to find his or her own resources.

As they begin to seek out resources, students face the problem of organizing their time and effort efficiently so that they can complete their proposals with minimal frustration and expenditure of energy. Self-discipline usually develops slowly, but the teacher can help by introducing the timetable: an outline of exactly what will be done, where it will be done, and when. This timetable serves as a guide for both the student’s efforts and the teacher’s supervision.

UT HOW SHALL we evaluate that portion of the program in which students are pursuing diverse activities and plans? A single test for a whole class or grade is inappropriate and often impossible to apply.

One way to assess unique individual or small-group activities is to establish the baseline performance from which students begin — and to do this in a manner that is appropriate to the type of activity in which the students will engage. The students themselves can propose or demonstrate these baseline performances. Then, at the very beginning of a given activity, the students and their teachers can agree on the levels of performance that will constitute acceptable evidence of minimal, moderate, or outstanding achievement.

There are a number of advantages to this approach. It offers every student an opportunity to achieve success — not in comparison with others, but in comparison with his or her own baseline performance. It maintains a focus on personal excellence by requiring each student to define his or her own best possible performance in demonstrable terms before the activity begins. At the same time, this definition gives each student a guide for evaluating his or her achievement.

Directing one's own activities and reaching out to new experiences and new levels of performance is a demanding way of learning.
with contacts within the school, organized by the teacher; they can later extend their associations outward to the community and to support systems that they initiate themselves. Support systems greatly enhance our capacity to act, and they often become the source of intense and highly valued experiences.

These ways to organize and manage students’ varied self-directed activities are only a few examples of practices appropriate to the paradigm. Readers maintaining their perspective as temporary advocates will see many other possibilities. But these examples illustrate two key principles: management procedures must be appropriate to the purposes of the paradigm, and they must teach the process.

UT WHAT OF the larger program in which these suggested teaching, learning, and management practices are embedded? What range of things would students be doing? And how would the pattern of the program change over 12 years (though even the assumption of “12 years” may be old-paradigm thinking)? We need at least a brief sketch of one possible program structure. Whatever the pattern, it must meet one criterion: every program component must be directed at increasing students’ abilities to direct their own lives and learning. And the total program must be cumulative, so that students are fully prepared to accomplish their tasks in the final, challenge year.

Let us imagine that schooling is divided into three blocks of four years each, as John Goodlad suggests in his new book, A Place Called School. Let us refer to the first four years as the Incoming Block, to the second four years as the Developing Block, and to the third four years as the Outgoing Block. Let us also agree that any given year will expose students to four basic modes of teaching and learning experiences: directed, assigned, self-directed, and open.

These modes represent a progressive increase in students’ control over the program and a progressive change in the role of the teacher. In the directed mode, the teacher plans and presents all instruction. In the assigned mode, the teacher assigns a goal or purpose, but students plan their own programs to achieve it. In the self-directed mode, students choose their own goals and the plans for achieving them — but within the framework of a specific subject, course, or field of study. In the open mode, students choose their own goals and fields of study and establish their own learning plans — with negotiation, but not restriction. The open mode begins in the first year and grows in importance until, in the 12th year, it becomes the basic mode. The assigned, directed, and self-directed modes serve the preparation for the open mode, in which students clarify and pursue their own intentions, conducting their own searches for meaning and becoming.

Throughout the three blocks and in all four modes, students regularly work in large groups, small groups, and individually — balancing the public and the private, the active and the reflective, the social and the personal. Throughout the program, teachers are open with students about decisions, sharing why and how they made their plans, often including students in their planning sessions, and leading students through planning sessions of their own.

The Developing Block

Even before children enter school, the school encourages parents to provide stimulation, opportunities, and encouragement for any initiatives these youngsters take. From the beginning of the Incoming Block, the school maintains this emphasis on students’ initiative. The four modes — although not necessarily in the order described — provide the structure for the day.

In the directed mode, the teacher in the Incoming Block introduces new fields of study appropriate to the students’ levels of interest and maturity, regularly incorporating students’ suggestions. In the assigned mode, the teacher begins by presenting choices among developed activities and gradually moves toward self-directed activities that require more and more planning by the students. In the open mode, students plan brief, self-directed “acts,” using short contracts that simply state what they want to do and how they will do it. They are coached to explore their talents and interests until they begin to cluster series of acts in a single kind of activity. As they do this,

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The Incoming Block

In the Incoming Block, the emphasis on focused competence. The four modes now become four aspects of each field of study. There are six such fields: scientific and logical inquiry; creative expression; the development of practical and vocational skills; mastery of an academic field; the practice of service to others; and lifestyle development, which includes fitness, adventure, and recreation.

The seventh field of study is on becoming active in them and knowledgeable about them. In the directed mode, the teacher introduces the nature and structure of a field, teaches basic principles and concepts, and trains students in the access and operating skills they need to function on their own. In the assigned mode, the teacher sets the goals and teaches students to plan ways to achieve them in their own styles. In the self-directed mode, the teacher shows them how to design their own curriculum units in the field.

The service component of the program is an essential complement to the personal focus of the other activities in the Developing Block; this component cultivates caring for others, a key trait of the kind of socially responsible graduates we seek to develop. In the field of service and in the other fields of study, students begin to make more use of sites and resources in the community. Teachers develop the directed and assigned aspects of the Developing Block curriculum, focusing on the attainment of student competence in each. The final year of the Developing Block includes a public demonstration that concentrates particularly on the expertise that students have developed in their own special fields.

The Outgoing Block

In the Outgoing Block, the emphasis shifts to preparation for the final year of schooling, during which the students plan
their own programs and activities. Emphasis in the fields of study shifts to preparation to meet the personal, social, vocational, and academic requirements for life after school. Emphasis also shifts to the assigned — and particularly to the self-directed and open — modes.

In the open mode, students now expand their planning to the development of “life themes.” In the third year, each student prepares a life plan that will become the rationale for the final-year program that he or she will design and negotiate with teachers and parents or with a mentor chosen from the community. Life plans are important documents that deal with the personal purposes, commitments, and contributions that students intend to develop as adults; the kinds of work at which they will become expert and the kinds of jobs they will pursue; the kinds of experiences, recreation, and lifestyles they anticipate; and their sense of the future and how they will prepare themselves to meet its exigencies.

It is also true that each student develops from the life plan is expected to be a personal challenge in the pursuit of excellence. This challenge leads to a final demonstration of accomplishment to the school and community. (One key product of the Outgoing Block is a portfolio of achievement that each student has developed to document his or her skills to future employers or to institutions of higher education.)

The 12th-year plan of each student should be the most exciting and productive that he or she can design. This plan can include not only individual studies and activities, but also teamwork, small-group seminars, workshops and courses that the student helps to develop, intensive electives, and special training at other schools. The teacher does not become less important but, rather, more essential — assuming new roles that only a skilled professional can fulfill. Even though the roles are more demanding, imagine the teacher’s pride in the contribution of this new paradigm to the lives of such students as Daisy, Kevin, Donna, and Tom.

ALTHOUGH I have outlined only one of many possible programs for education in the self-directing process, we can begin to sense the potential of this paradigm for powerful cumulative effects. If we implemented such a program, what kind of larger context would it need in order to thrive? What system of administration and organization would foster, rather than confound, the kinds of learning activities and programs that I have described?

This new paradigm teaches students powerful ways to learn. It teaches them to think, to act, and to contribute.

The key principle is to construct a pure line of positive support for the new program. It seems unlikely that the self-directed paradigm would flourish in a context where the curriculum, textbooks, and tests are prescribed; where a districtwide hierarchy retains control over program decisions; where large schools operate on inflexible schedules of fixed periods for subjects taught by teachers trained only to deliver a prescribed curriculum; and where the community participates superficially or not at all in the life of the school. Such a context may support the familiar paradigm well, but it would not support the new one I am proposing.

Let us imagine a system that would support activities and programs focused on self-directed learning. Suppose that we are in a Developing Block school of about 500 students, one of three such units sharing the specialized faculties of one large building. Our school has autonomy over its program — although we must negotiate our proposals with the district staff and school board — and control over its budget for supplies, materials, equipment, services, and staffing. We are organized into four “blocks,” each about 125 students each, with a differentiated staff of five teaching each subunit. Five other staff members handle certain services for all the subunits, such as the coordination of community sites and resources, the management of technological equipment, the maintenance of student records, and special counseling for students who are negotiating open-mode contracts.

The shift toward greater school autonomy has been balanced by a shift toward greater participation by parents and other members of the community, both in the work of the school and in its governance. An advisory board — headed by the unit principal and composed of teachers, students, parents, and community leaders — has developed the vision of excellence that the school will be pursuing during the next four years. Task teams, led by members of the advisory board and characterized by equally shared participation, are improving the services and resources available to students; designing new programs, school events, and materials; and developing proposals for improvements in the school and its operation. The basic program in each subunit has been developed by its staff, following guidelines agreed upon by the unit staff as a whole, within the framework of the vision — and with the advice and assistance — of the advisory board.

Services from outside the community that affect the operation of our school have begun to adapt to the new paradigm. Publishers, suppliers (particularly of high technology), and curriculum specialists are producing materials, equipment, and programs that support self-directed learning. For instance, one company has supplied us with training programs in the basic skills that any child or adult can access on a computer from school or home. The research and development community is producing information and ideas to guide improvements in our practice. Institutions that train teachers are now teaching them how to develop curricula and how to work in schools with programs of self-direction. And they are teaching them through programs in the self-directing mode. As a result, more and more staff members are not only skilled in the new system, but practice it themselves. They have their own professional learning plans, which they work on partly during school time as an expected and supported inservice training activity. Their personal development prepares them to manage improvements in the school, using the same process, and enables them to model the process of systematic planning for their students.

We note that the greater participation of the constituencies served by the school has led to a greater sense of shared responsibility for the quality of the education we offer and greater support for our program. The effect of greater participation is especially noticeable among the students; their increased involvement in the decision-making process has had a visible positive impact on their own commitment and performance. It is clear that the context teaches. But the need for continuing change constantly presents itself.

As we enter our fourth year in the new paradigm, all schools in our feeder network report that the initial problems have faded and that the challenge now is to adapt to students who are much better prepared for self-direction and much more varied in the kinds and degrees of excellence they have achieved.

Although brief, this description of a management system does illustrate the principle that, with a pure line of positive support, a program that is self-direction can not only survive, but thrive. If we put together the three management practices I have proposed — 1) the con-
tracts, the timetables, and the baseline evaluations for teaching; 2) the three-block, four-mode program structure; and 3) the larger context of support — the picture of a complete and integrated program to teach students to direct their own learning emerges. From it we can reasonably propose that a new paradigm of schooling, designed to prepare students to manage their own education in their graduating year, is both possible and desirable.

Y NOW, you realize that we have not only imagined a paradigm for education in self-direction; we have done it by using the same systematic process of self-direction proposed at the beginning of this article. It is a powerful process for designing the future we desire.

I began with a vision of a paradigm shift from the familiar emphasis on students absorbing assigned content to an emphasis on students becoming self-directed in their pursuit of learning. My goal was to outline the kind of program that would enable students to design their own curricula for their senior year of schooling. My strategic plan was to teach students the process of strategic personal planning through programs that balanced teachers’ goals and presentations with the students’ own goals and plans for learning. To do this, I had to organize instruction, learning activities, practices, and contexts in ways that would have a significant, positive impact not only on students’ ability to direct their own learning, but also, holistically, on all aspects of their development. My self-management strategy was to design a system of instruments, practices, procedures, and organizational features for the classroom, school, and districts to provide a support of positive support for the activities of both teachers and students in this new mode. My challenge was to shape all of these strategies that they promised to cultivate in students the desire and the skills to pursue excellence in their lives and learning. My success in producing even a shadowy outline of such a paradigm can be measured against the criteria I set for an excellent proposal in the beginning.

We know that educating in this new paradigm is possible, even for people working alone without the benefit of an organization and a management system designed to support them. The reports that accompany my article in this issue of the Kappan, written by people who run Walkabout, Challenge Education, or School Improvement Programs, are testimony to that fact.

Walkabout, an idea that I first explored in print 10 years ago this month in the pages of the Kappan, introduced a number of the features that I have incorporated in this description of a new paradigm for education. Recognizing that many cultures, especially primitive ones, have always marked the transition of their youth to adulthood with an appropriate but demanding test of adult skills, I posed the question 10 years ago, What would be an appropriate test for transition to adulthood in our more complex and sophisticated society? The answer I offered was to challenge students in their last years of schooling to challenge themselves, by setting demanding accomplishments for them to achieve in five areas: adventure, creative expression, practical skill, logical inquiry, and service. In a ceremony to follow, at the end of their senior year, students would demonstrate their readiness for adulthood by presenting to the community the results of their efforts to meet these challenges. The demonstration would be followed by a celebration of the students’ achievements.

My original article emphasized the Walkabout as a graduation event. The practices recommended to guide the transition to adulthood later evolved into a more complete approach to self-directed action for students and adults. This transformation drew on the experiences of those who established Walkabout programs and came about through the cooperation of several colleagues (most notably, Gary Phillips, Peter Norman, and Pat Holborn).

This newer program, called Challenge Education, has been introduced successfully in schools, communities, and business settings. The paradigm I have just described includes many elements of Challenge Education.

Recognizing that it is one thing to propose Challenge Education and quite another thing to implement the many changes this paradigm requires, Gary Phillips developed a School Improvement Program that uses the challenge as a technique to accomplish that task. In the School Improvement Program, a principal chooses a small group of teachers and parents to be trained to conduct the change process. This group then trains a larger planning team of teachers, parents, members of the community, representatives of business and industry, and students. Together, they develop a long-range vision, plan strategies, determine priorities, and establish a timeline. Task groups, representing the same segments of the community, are then formed to begin the work toward achievement, demonstration, and celebration. More than 150 schools have taken part in this process, and several of them have subsequently won statewide awards for improvement and excellence. Many teachers in these and other schools have continued to struggle, despite difficult times, for programs designed to empower students to direct their own lives and learning.

I have chosen here to describe the school system as a whole, using stark generalizations. But I gratefully acknowledge that, without the examples established by these innovative educators, I would have had little to say and very little reason to say it. Although the word new appears often in this article, you will realize — and I readily confirm — that many of the ideas I have presented rest on a long history of theory and practice proposed and enacted by others. Even today, if we look with fresh eyes from the perspective of the new paradigm, we see everywhere evidence of its growing importance, arguments for its wider use, and guidance for using it better.

O NE FINAL question remains. Is this new paradigm worth the pursuit? In other words, is it the best future that we can imagine? There are a number of compelling reasons for answering, Yes, it is. The new paradigm teaches students powerful ways to learn. It teaches them to think, to act, and to contribute. It enables them to take charge not only of their learning but also of their lives.

The new paradigm is holistic, developing in concert both desirable inner states and the strategies for successful learning and action. It is the appropriate form of education for citizens of a participatory democracy. It involves members of a community in clearly defined ways that make education an enterprise that they share with the school.

The paradigm involves teachers in high-tech roles that no high-tech device can replace — roles that not only make significant, observable differences in the lives of their students. The paradigm also provides excellent preparation for students entering a world where there are many personal and public problems to solve and where the only certainty is change.

Is this a paradigm of education to pursue with passion and to celebrate with pride? If so, let us clarify the vision and begin to plan how we will make it happen.

But if the advocacy I requested from you earlier has faded, do not let fade the key question for us all: What is the vision of excellent education that we will strive to accomplish during the next five years? This is always the key question. Let us answer it ourselves, rather than have other agencies answer it for us. As the earth turns, let the dawn break on a future of our own creation.