THE CONCEPT OF FUNDAMENTAL EDUCATIONAL CHANGE
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ABSTRACT. In this essay, Leonard Waks contributes to a reconceptualization of “fundamental educational change.” By distinguishing sharply between educational change at the organizational and the institutional levels, Waks shows that the mechanisms of change at these two levels are entirely different. He then establishes, by means of a conceptual argument, that fundamental educational change takes place not at the organizational, but rather at the institutional level. Along the way Waks takes Larry Cuban’s influential conceptual framework regarding educational change as both a starting point and target of appraisal.

INTRODUCTION
Since the early 1980s, when a flood of educational reforms swept over the United States after publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983, and similar reforms were undertaken in Canada and other industrial countries, a distinct subfield devoted to educational change has emerged within educational studies. This field now has its own research agenda and vocabulary, a scholarly journal, and even a definitive research handbook.¹

Contributors to this field of educational change have for the most part been recruited from university-based faculties of education, though other participants have included officials of national, state, or provincial governments and local educational agencies, as well as researchers and consultants at policy think tanks and research and development firms. Such individuals and organizations focus on training educational professionals for, or governing and regulating practices of, or providing research and development or consulting services to, the mainstream educational system.

The field of educational change has as a result concentrated upon planned change at various organizational levels (school, district, state, or province), especially within the mainstream system. It has devoted some attention to organizations (for example, charter schools) emerging at the periphery of the mainstream system. But it has until now tended entirely to neglect educational developments taking place beyond the confines of this educational system (such as the growth of home schooling and corporate universities).

Starting in the 1990s, leaders in the field of educational change began to question these commitments. Two considerations weighed heavily in this reevaluation. First, many in the field realized that the innovations they had been proposing were rarely implemented as intended. Or if they were, they failed to spread...
comprehensively throughout their target organizations or failed to gain the long-term commitments from organizational stakeholders required for enduring resilience. Even when they were implemented as intended, they frequently failed to produce the intended consequences — for instance, while new curricula were introduced, they failed to raise scores on standardized tests. The field of educational change appeared to be failing in its primary mission: to achieve real and lasting change.

Second, a deeper conceptual understanding of educational change was being advanced by theorists who, using insights from sociology and organizational theory, explained how organizations tend to absorb change in such a manner as to retain fundamental stability. Larry Cuban, to take a prominent example, argued in an influential handbook chapter that in a judo-like fashion, organizations respond to external forces by converting changes meant to be fundamental into minor, or incremental, changes compatible with existing organizational structures. His terminology has become widely and uncritically accepted in the field, as scholars recognized that reform efforts have failed to conceive educational change in its full complexity.

By the end of the 1990s leaders in the emerging field of educational change were calling for new approaches to the practice of change, grounded in new, but yet to be formulated, conceptions of change and the change process. Andy Hargreaves, for example, noted that although “educational change is something we now understand much better than a decade ago...too many change efforts remain disappointing and ineffective.” Noting that the field has attended primarily to the structural and strategic aspects of educational change, he called for new conceptualizations that, in his words, would push the boundaries of educational change. In particular, he urged scholars and practitioners to attend more closely to the societal forces that drive educational change and to move beyond images of change as a linear, predictable, means-to-an-end process in favor of models of change as a complex and even “chaotic” process.

Meanwhile, events in the real world were running ahead of both theories of educational change and practical efforts of change agents. Citizens, social movement leaders, and governments, frustrated by the slow pace and poor results of within-the-system change efforts, began to take matters into their own hands. In the United States, charter school enabling legislation was initially passed in a few pioneering states; then the charter movement snowballed as most of the states

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rapidly followed suit, empowering individuals and groups of all sorts immediately to create innovative schools.

At the same time state governmental agencies took control of the schools in several prominent urban school districts. To take one example, the commonwealth of Pennsylvania seized the Philadelphia schools from the local school district and placed them under the control of a state reform commission. The commission, in turn, placed dozens of schools under the control of various private nonprofit and for-profit firms, which used charters and other mechanisms immediately to impose innovative educational designs. The federal government encouraged such developments in its No Child Left Behind policy, which requires school districts to provide students in schools failing to make “adequate yearly progress” on improvement of standardized test scores with alternatives, including charter schools. Home schooling, meanwhile, has grown fifteen percent annually during recent years; it now comprises more than three percent of school-age children. Whatever “educational change” might have meant in the 1980s and 1990s, after 2000 it has no longer referred only to activities confined within the mainstream educational system.

In this essay I contribute to a conceptualization of “fundamental educational change” in keeping with these new intellectual demands and practical developments. Along the way I will take Larry Cuban’s influential conceptual framework regarding educational change as both a starting point and target of appraisal. My aim is to distinguish sharply between change at the organizational and the institutional levels, to show that the mechanisms of change at these levels are entirely different, and then to establish by means of conceptual argument that fundamental educational change takes place not at the organizational but rather at the institutional level.

In the next section I make some preliminary distinctions. Noting that the meaning of “educational change” in the literature is not always clear, I lay out categories by which changes may be differentiated, including the entity undergoing change, the feature changing, as well as the scope, rate, and magnitude of change. In the third and fourth sections I shift my focus to the entity undergoing change. Educational change takes place in entities at a variety of levels (individuals, groups, organizations, and so on), and I contrast educational change at the organizational and institutional levels. Recognizing that the key terms “group,” “organization,” and “institution” are not self-explanatory, I rough out analyses of these terms. In the fifth section I turn to the depth and magnitude of change, seeking more clearly to distinguish the major, or fundamental, changes often sought by social movements and government agencies from the minor, or incremental, changes recently claimed to be enacted by educational organizations. I conclude that fundamental change is for the most part situated at the institutional level. By this I mean that the kind of educational change called for by society is primarily a change in the educational institution and only secondarily a change in existing organizations, and that broad expression of dissatisfaction with mainstream educational organizations and practices implies that the educational institution is already
undergoing significant, if not yet full-blown, change. In a final section I explore briefly some implications of this conclusion for individuals and groups seeking to generate fundamental change.

Preliminary Comments on “Change”

The meaning of the term “educational change” in the educational literature is shaped by unspoken background assumptions, much as the meaning of the term “the city” as used by New Yorkers (wherever they are located) is governed by the unspoken convention that it refers exclusively to Manhattan. When Andy Hargreaves says that educational change is “so difficult...and getting it to take place for more than brief periods can be so hard,” he must in the same way have some more specific but unspoken reference in mind than whatever is included simply in the meaning of the term “change” itself.

Change, after all, is taking place all around us, all of the time. We live in a Heraclitean world. “You can’t step in the same river twice.” A flower blooms, and then it fades. A person grows old, and then dies. An alarm starts ringing, and then it stops. A car in the street changes lanes. Intentional change, moreover, is as ubiquitous as change in the course of natural events. I turn off the alarm clock. You empty the mailbox. She changes lanes. And this is as much so in educational as any other settings. The classroom period begins, and then it ends. The geography lesson is followed by algebra. A student cannot spell “Mississippi,” but after a practice session, he can. The textbook committee changes the literature textbook. The teacher introduces a new unit on the environment. The principal rearranges the schedule of staff meetings.

Are such changes all really “so difficult”? Is getting them to take place “so hard”? To say that they are is to intend something more specific than is contained within the meaning of the word “change.” What is intended is a big, or major, or fundamental change. It borders on tautology to say that achieving a fundamental change is “difficult.” The notion of “fundamental change,” however, is hardly clear.

Perhaps some preliminary clarifying observations are in order: when we speak of change, we refer to some feature of some object of the world that changes, such that at one time the feature is present (or absent) and at a subsequent time it is absent (or present). First the alarm is ringing, later it is off. First the flower is in bloom, later it is faded. First the light is green, then the green light goes out and a red light appears. When specifying a change, we can typically indicate the identity of the object that is changing (the alarm, the flower, the traffic light), the feature changing (ringing, blooming, color), as well as the rate (quickly, slowly) and magnitude (large, small) of the change. Similarly we can speak of the causes (a natural law, intentional human action) of the change, and its consequences. In the following discussion I first consider organizations and institutions as the entities undergoing change, and then turn to issues regarding the magnitude of change.

4. Ibid., 281.
In the educational setting we can speak of change with respect to objects of different levels — individuals, groups, organizations, systems, and the like — because these objects are arranged in a nested hierarchy of administrative levels: the individuals are in groups, which are components of organizations (classes, departments, schools, districts), which are in turn components of larger organized (regional, national) systems, and so on.

The focus of the literature on educational change has to this point been upon organizations and organizational change. Larry Cuban, for instance, addresses change at the levels of the classroom, the school, and the school district, explicitly considered as organizations. In another example Michael Fullan organizes his textbook on educational change in terms of local organizations (schools and districts) and regional and national organizations (professional organizations, governmental organizations, and the like). This focus on organizations has, I maintain, misled those seeking to understand fundamental change.

To understand why, we must first ask: How are we to conceive of groups and organizations and institutions? And what is change at these levels? In answering these and related semantic questions, I will draw on close study of the origins of and root concepts expressed by these terms in order to sharpen awareness of their distinct meanings. While this method may be somewhat tedious, it will help us avoid misunderstandings stemming from overlapping uses of these terms found in current theories of fundamental change.

The word “group” enters English from the French groupe, meaning knot. The same root word for knot can be found in Spanish and Italian. The Latin root is associated with lumping, massing, or tying. The earliest use of “group” in English (dating to the seventeenth century) is to refer to an assemblage of figures that, taken together, form a complete design, as in figures in a painting or columns in a building. This aesthetic use was extended early on to music, where a “group” of notes was a coupling for harmonic effect. From here, the term was generalized during the eighteenth century to refer to any assemblage of objects in physical proximity, and it finally evolved into the broad contemporary sense of an assemblage of persons or objects regarded as forming a unity on account of any common feature or relation. We now refer to any multiplicity unified by perception or concept as a “group.” Groups can change, for example, by adding or losing members, by persisting (so they grow in experience with one another) or dispersing (as when a band splits up), or when the condition according to which it is tied together is altered (as when we change Ms. Brown’s class to include not just five-year-olds but also six-year-olds).

“Organization” is logically a stronger concept. The root word in “organization” is “organ,” derived from the Greek *erg*, meaning work. In the relevant sense, an organ is a differentiated but integrated part of a whole, a part that is adapted for a specific job or function. Something is “organic” when it is composed of distinct but structurally united organs, which serve distinct purposes but are coordinated for the united action of the whole. To “organize,” then, is to make organic, to give structure and interdependence to parts in order to preserve vital processes. It is to put into working order, to give a definite and orderly structure to, to form (as though) into a unified living being. The *Oxford English Dictionary* also identifies a more specific biological sense of the term: an organ is a part or member of an animal or plant body adapted by its structure for a particular vital function, such as digestion, respiration, perception, or locomotion.

Thus, the key notions contained within the concept of “organization” are (1) work: tasks or vital functions; (2) differentiation: of multiple parts or “organs” performing these tasks; and (3) structural unity: parts arranged to provide and maintain a vitality of the whole. The extension of “organ” and its cognates to living things, or “organisms,” is very natural, and biological analogies are found throughout the discussion of organizational change.

**Organizational Change**

Cuban begins his classic discussion of organizational stability and change by challenging the common belief that change is divorced from stability, that change and stability are opposites in the organizational realm. This point is not original. In an essay first published in 1973, Talcott Parsons noted the necessary interplay of stability and change in organizations. As organizations are, for Parsons, structured or orderly arrangements of parts, coordinated to maintain vitality, alterations in the processes of the parts are needed to maintain the structure of the whole. As he put it, stability is a defining characteristic of structure, equivalent to the more specific concept of equilibrium. Stability, in turn, depends essentially upon continual variation of processes to neutralize internal or external sources of variability. Thus organs change in order for the organism or organization to remain stable. Stability requires change.

**First-order Change and Incremental Change.** Cuban draws explicitly upon similar formulations of Paul Watzlawick, John Weakland, and Richard Fisch, who define two kinds of organizational changes: first- and second-order changes. Cuban relabels these “incremental” and “fundamental,” and this terminology has been widely adopted in discussions of educational change.

*First-order* organizational change is change initiated to enhance the existing organization by correcting deficiencies in organizational policies and procedures. First-order change, Cuban says, assumes that the existing goals and structure are

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adequate and desirable. The changes are intended not to change the structure, but rather to maintain it as it is. This is Parson’s “variation of processes to neutralize sources of variability.”

For example, a school faculty may be deficient in its advising function, giving rise to persistent complaints from parents. A change in policies regarding faculty advising duties, perhaps coupled to new procedures for monitoring faculty in their performance of these duties, would be, following this definition, a first order change. It would involve no change in either the goals of the organization (here, to advise students adequately) or the structures (here, the parts — students, faculty, and administration and the relations among them). This would contrast with the introduction of a new department of advising, staffed with nonteaching advisors. The introduction of such a department would constitute a change in structure, as the organization would be more differentiated, with an additional unit defining new functional roles.

Cuban labels first-order changes “incremental.” This use of the term appears to me to involve something of a category mistake, as it runs together the entities undergoing change and the depth or magnitude of change. An “increment” is an increase in number or size. First-order change as defined by Cuban, however, is change in the functioning of organs to preserve the organization’s structure. Such functional change may be small or large, quantitative or qualitative, and more or less important than structural change. Consider the example of changes in policies and procedures of advising. These may be window dressing to mollify dissatisfied parents or a wholesale imposition upon faculty affecting the entire organizational climate. They remain first-order changes regardless of how small or big — that is, how “incremental” — they are.

What makes matters worse is that most of Cuban’s examples of so-called “incremental” change, as we shall soon see, involve the introduction of new “organs” (such as driving education, or compensatory programs), rather than changes in the functioning of existing organs. Thus, his “incremental” changes seem to fit the definition of second-order, not first-order, changes.

SECOND-ORDER CHANGE AND FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE. Second-order change, as Cuban explains it, is change that alters the way that an organization is put together. It introduces, he says, new goals, structures, and roles, and transforms familiar ways of performing duties into novel solutions. As an example of a second-order change that has actually taken place, he points to the replacement of the common school by the graded elementary school in mid-nineteenth-century America. This change involved structural differentiation: the graded school had new parts put together in a new way. Children now were grouped in age-graded classrooms, where previously they had been grouped in benches within a single one-room school, according to their discernable academic progress.

Cuban also provides several examples of second-order educational changes that failed to take hold: the introduction of progressive teaching methods in the early twentieth century, of challenging curricula designed by leading scientists in
the 1950s, and of open-space buildings in the 1970s. These changes were structural, in that they altered basic structures of time and space utilization, teacher authority, or relations between university personnel and the school curriculum.

Cuban designates second-order changes as "fundamental." The problem, as indicated previously, is that most of his examples of incremental change also fit the definition of second-order rather than first-order change. The introduction of a driver education program, no matter how unimportant to the overall functioning of the school, still introduces new goals, structures, and roles: the goal of teaching young people to drive, the structural unit of a driver education program, the position of driver education teacher, and the student role of automobile driver.

Cuban’s point in labeling these changes “incremental” appears to be that such changes do not affect many students very much of the time. They are “incremental” in the sense that they are “unimportant” (the bother here is that there is no such sense of the term). They leave many core functions unaltered. We can accept his insight that in loosely coupled organizations new structural units may be added or subtracted without much impact upon the functioning of existing units and thus are smooth ways to respond to pressures for change without changing very much. But for him to call such changes “incremental” seems to toss out the very definitions of first- and second-order change that he introduced specifically to explain fundamental change.9

INSTITUTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Moving from organizations to institutions, the term “institution” has many overlapping senses, all related to “organization” in one way or another. In one sense we speak of “social institutions” such as the educational, political, or economic institutions of society. In this sense the economic institution certainly has much to do with business firms, for example, but it is not itself a firm or any other organization. But we also do speak of firms as institutions; for instance, we may describe an insurance company as an established institution, so in this sense an institution is an organization. And we also speak of the buildings in which firms conduct their work as institutions.

The same three senses appear to apply to educational and political and cultural institutions. We speak broadly of the cultural institution of the United States, much as we might speak of the nation’s educational or political institutions. But we also speak, in another sense, of the various universities, museums, and similar organizations as cultural institutions. The Smithsonian Institution, for example, is a cultural organization that operates museums. But the name also applies to a group of buildings, as when we say we are going to Washington, D.C., to visit the Smithsonian Institution.

9. Cuban hedges a bit by qualifying his identification of second-order with fundamental change. For example, he says at one point that second-order change is fundamental in that it alters “essential” ways that organizations are put together. At another he says that it is change in the “basic” structure of organizations. But this does not help matters. Second-order change is defined in terms of change in the goals, structures, and roles. To say that it is fundamental to the extent that it involves “essential” arrangements or “basic” structures is just to say that it is fundamental when and only when it is.
It is in the elusive first sense ("social institutions") that institutions and institutional change may be distinguished from organizations and organizational change. We can begin to understand this sense by starting with the verb "to institute," which derives from the Latin *instituere*, to set up, establish. The verb has the sense of to begin, to introduce, to bring into use or practice, to found. Institution, as the act of instituting, has the sense of establishing, ordaining, or setting in motion, of giving form or order to a thing. To ordain, for its part, in its earliest use (fourteenth century) means to arrange, put in order, prepare, furnish, fit out, equip.

These roots can be observed in the contemporary sociological sense of an institution. For Walton Hamilton, social institutions manifest forms of thought and action of some prevalence or permanence, which are embedded in the habits of a group or the customs of a people. They fix the confines and impose form upon the activities of human beings. Hamilton emphasizes the ubiquity of social institutions: "about every urge of mankind an institution grows up; the expression of every taste and capacity is crowded into an institutional mold." Shmuel Eisenstadt's account is only slightly weaker. For him, institutions are "regulative principles which organize most of the activities of individuals into definite organizational patterns from the point of view of some of the perennial, basic problems of any society or ordered social life."

Following these accounts from authoritative reference texts, I will use "institutions" to mean social arrangements establishing, ordaining, or authorizing the ideas, norms, organizations, and frameworks that regulate the processes of human interaction in the primary areas of human life. Institutions establish, set up, and arrange social life — they put it in order and set it to work. Sociologists recognize the major institutional spheres as the family and kinship, education, economics, politics, and culture; there is an additional sphere of stratification, which regulates differential distributions of positions, resources, and rewards within a society. These institutions are regarded as inherent to the nature of human society, constituting the very definition of society and concomitant with the very existence of social life.

Institutional spheres overlap. Occupational education, for example, is mandated and funded by the political institution, is located in the educational institution, and is preparatory for participation in the economic institution. It consists in large measure of learning how to use various symbols (the cultural institution) and

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is distributed according to the norms of stratification. It is precisely this ubiquitous overlap of institutional spheres that binds the various activities of social life together and constitutes the social whole as a society. The structure of society is in this sense the relatively stable set of these institutions and their interrelations.

Institutions build up cumulatively. Each holds within itself remnants of behavioral and symbolic forms from the past, “vestiges of design and accident, the stuff of idea and custom, from many ages, societies, civilizations, or climates of opinion.”14 Thus, we still speak of “liberal arts education” as a function of the contemporary undergraduate college. But the idea is an anachronism; such education is no longer targeted at *liberi*, those with the leisure for study and participation in the polity, and the arts (rhetoric, logic, grammar, and the like) required for such participation no longer play the central role they did when it was so confined. Yet remnants of the values, ideas, and habits from ancient and medieval society continue unconsciously to influence today's undergraduate education.

Institutions form the background of organizational life. They shape the habits, ideas, and norms regulating the existing organizations that they authorize or ordain. They make up the cognitive and affective surround of organizations. The goals and practices of organizations must conform to institutional norms and ideas to retain their social position, and they are pressured to change functionally or structurally as the institutions ordaining them undergo change.

As background, social institutions are rarely in our field of vision. They are like water to fish, the transparent milieu within which the objects they authorize claim attention. In everyday life it is not the institutions but the organizations they ordain, with their norms and positions and roles, that visibly regulate our activities and interactions. In the role of student one attends, fulfills the requirements of, and graduates from *this* college, not the educational institution. But it is the institution that breathes meaning into organizations such as this particular college. If the organization does not appear to fulfill the purpose inherent within the notion of a college as it functions within higher education, we will not recognize it as a collegiate organization. (We do not consider barbers colleges as real colleges established within the higher educational institution, but as mere proprietary schools.) If the educational institution changes, moreover, undergraduate colleges we had once considered real colleges might no longer count as colleges, and completing their courses of study might no longer constitute college graduation.

When the educational institution undergoes change, some organizations are able to keep pace by initiating functional or structural change. Harvard College, to take a famous example, morphed into a research university in the late nineteenth century by adding units (such as faculties of natural sciences) and innovative procedures (such as the elective system). But others failed to align with the new institutional ideas and norms, lost their institutional status and thus their claim on social resources, and disappeared.

Finally, institutions are also organic in that their parts (norms, ideas, organizations, and frameworks) are subject to change in response to internal and external pressures, so as to maintain stability in the institutional arrangement as a whole. And society is also organic in that its parts (social institutions) are subject to change to maintain overall societal stability.  

The Institutional Dimension in Cuban’s Theory of Stability and Change

Cuban’s account of organizational stability and change steps quietly beyond the level of organizations, making implicit reference to an institutional dimension, at two places. First, Cuban adds a “historical curriculum” to the conventionally distinguished intended [adopted, official], taught, and learned curricula. About this “historical curriculum,” he says,

> Every effort to alter the intended or taught curriculum has to contend with the past, that is, the formal purposes, official content, buried assumptions about knowledge, the organization and relationships within classrooms...that are inherited. It is the historical curriculum that contains the accumulated weight of previous innovations and mandates...like a coral, a mass of skeletons from millions of animals built up over time that accumulates into reefs above and below the sea line.  

While each organization certainly has its very own history, the “historical curriculum” in this sense is clearly institutional, not organizational. It weighs more or less equally on every organization ordained by the educational institution. Even a brand new school with freshly minted teachers will feel the weight of this accumulation of meaning and habit.

Second, Cuban notes that as schools are tax supported and lay-governed, school boards must retain the support of the constituencies; without it they would lose their legitimacy and then their clientele. Thus schools have to answer to the expectations of constituents:

> The public expects teachers to be certified to teach. The public expects mathematics offered in the eighth grade to prepare fourteen-year-olds for algebra in the ninth grade. The public expects transcripts of high school graduates to be considered by colleges...If the public loses confidence in the school organization’s capacity to act like a system with these rules and classifications, political support and funding shrink swiftly.

15. The approach to social institutions adopted here is broadly “structural-functional,” within the tradition of Émile Durkheim, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, and Talcott Parsons, among others. This is the oldest and still the dominant sociological philosophy. It has been critiqued as neglecting conflict and privileging established institutional orders over proposed innovations on the grounds that existing orders are “functional.” These criticisms have been addressed by sociologists in this tradition, and the overall framework has been reformulated to obviate such concerns. For instance, in Social Theory and Social Structure [New York: Free Press, 1968], Robert K. Merton addressed the criticism that functionalism contains a bias in favor of the status quo by noting that, from a logical point of view, functionalism does not privilege existing structures because innovative alternatives could serve the same functions. Merton’s critique of functional unity introduces issues of power inequalities and conflict into a broadly functionalist perspective. The essays in Jeffery C. Alexander, ed., Neofunctionalism [Beverly Hills: Sage, 1985] and Neofunctionalism and After [Oxford: Blackwell, 1998], have reformulated functionalist theory in ways that sidestep the familiar criticisms.  


17. Ibid.
The public mind, in other words, is furnished with institutional categories (cer-
tification, high school subjects, graduation and relations among them). Here
again the factors mentioned — ninth-grade algebra, or graduation, or links con-
necting high school to college — are in no way specific to just this organization.
Institutional, not organizational, categories lie behind public assessments of par-
ticular organizations and ultimately lead to provision or withholding of public
authorization.

But note that while Cuban’s list of expectations may represent long-standing
institutional demands, some items may no longer be in force. Do parents opting
for charter schools demand that teachers be certified? Do they always insist that
computer networking not replace algebra in ninth grade? Possibly not, and this
shows that while the beliefs, values, and norms composing an institution may be
relatively stable over long periods of time, they are hardly permanent. The Soviet
Union disappeared, and institutionalized racial segregation morphed into some-
thing quite different. Why should the educational institution itself not change in
fundamental ways?

Cuban considers this possibility in a closing remark. While he explicitly sug-
gests that his combination of political and organizational frameworks to explain
stability amid change is “generic to all settings, and timeless in understanding cur-
rricular stability and change,” he recognizes that other scholars think that “generic
perspectives that cut across place and time may be inappropriate.” The consid-
erations here suggest that organizational frameworks themselves must be placed in
a wider context of evolving social institutions.

To summarize, education as a social institution consists of the background
ideas, values, norms, and frameworks that motivate and regulate organizations,
that breathe life into them and, when they have fallen out of alignment, withdraw
life from them. These ideas, values, norms, and frameworks are conditioned by the
past and are embedded in present habit. The institution in this sense is rarely, and
then only incompletely, within our field of vision. It comprises the stable, trans-
parent background of organizational life in any historical period.

INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

That said, institutional arrangements, like the specific organizations they
authorize, change over time. Institutions are adaptable tools for meeting basic
human purposes. The educational institution, for example, ordains organizations
serving various social, cultural, and occupational needs, and ultimately withdraws

18. American schools today continue to serve distinct racial populations, but this is no longer an effect
of the institution of segregation.
20. This basic function of institutions as tools for survival was emphasized by Bronislaw Malinowski
and runs through the sociological and anthropological literature. In his book The Institutional Order,
Turner says, “The analysis of human social institutions begins with the recognition that social structures
and systems of cultural symbols [are] used to sustain humans in an environment...ultimately a social
institution is defined in terms of its consequences — often termed ‘functions’ — for maintaining, repro-
ducing, and organizing a population so that it remains viable in an environment” [2, 4].
this ordination from organizations that no longer serve these needs. Institutions are interconnected and coordinated components of a society’s life, and as one sphere changes, others must also adapt to maintain stability. Unless such coordination exists, social agents will be frustrated in attempts to meet their needs and will experience strain. For example, the institution of higher education evolved after the Civil War to coordinate graduation from occupational curricula with entry-level positions in professional and technical occupations. For many years a close fit prevailed. As a result, graduates were destined to feel frustrated when their diplomas failed to grant them entry to the associated jobs.

But if and when such failures become commonplace, people gradually readjust their ideas and habits in response to these frustrations, and the institutions, through this process, experience change.

Hamilton notes that practices experiencing high esteem at one time may fall from grace while others rejected during the same period may subsequently win tolerance and then general acceptance: “As one social system passes into another and the values and manner of living are transformed, one institution gives way to another better adapted to the times.”

On this understanding, every experience of strain or resistance in response to action, every thought that things could be better than they are, contains at least the seeds of institutional change, though thoroughgoing institutional change requires that organizations be brought into alignment with the new institutional norms.

**THE PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

Several models of the process of institutional change, specifying particular mechanisms at various phases of the process, have been put forward. While the primary purpose of this essay is not to account empirically for the process or mechanisms of institutional change but merely to provide an analysis of the concept (as it is related to “fundamental” change), it may be useful to lay out in greater detail a possible sequence of events culminating in thoroughgoing institutional change and relate it to a familiar example of fundamental educational change, the emergence of the American common school from the 1830s through the 1850s. First, I will provide an abstract account of this sequence of events.

**Stage 1: Misalignment.** Changes, whether internal to the institution or taking place elsewhere in the social system, bring the institution out of alignment with other social institutions.

**Stage 2: Protest.** Some individuals and groups experience frustrations and express dissatisfaction, but entrenched and more powerful agents deny their

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22. See, for example, Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution*. A model of institutional change in education has recently been advanced by William Reid in *Curriculum as Institution and Practice* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999). I draw heavily on both of these sources in laying out a general model of the change sequence here.
demands. The older institution no longer functions as taken-for-granted background, however, but now emerges as a figure subject to reflection and criticism, implying that the institution has already changed significantly, in that the norms, and the organizations they ordain, are being rejected.

Stage 3: Ad Hoc Alternatives. New ideas proliferate and resources are mobilized for new forms of outside-the-box actions, even prior to the emergence of concrete mechanisms for broader implementation. Agents at least think and speak about withdrawing from organizations ordained by the older institution and begin seeking to handle their needs in various innovative ad hoc ways.

Stage 4: Entrepreneurship. “Institutional entrepreneurs” then specify new ideas and action patterns in forms more suitable for public commitment and institutionalization. They take some of the ideas developed in stage 3, and add or subtract elements to broaden their appeal. Public discussion of these ideas further undermines older institutional forms, as debate further weakens their taken-for-granted character.

Stage 5: Responsible Innovation. Some of these specified innovations are brought into existence by responsible agents who can be held accountable.

Stage 6: Social Construction. A process of social construction and negotiation is initiated, in which some of these innovations are rewarded and others rejected, depending upon their acceptability to various stakeholders in terms of evolving beliefs and values. In this process, innovative operational moves and innovative vocabularies become interdefined.

Stage 7: Institutionalization. Rewarded innovations gain further commitments of resources and participants. Their ideas become more influential and their practices become models for further innovations. Innovations selected in this way continue through cycles of constructive adjustment and feedback until they are gradually institutionalized, becoming part of the accepted, more differentiated institutional pattern and gradually losing their character as innovative or different.

Stage 8: Reorganization. Some older organizations adapt structurally to lay claim to a role in the new institutional pattern, others remain unchanged but serve niche clientele, and others disappear.

There is nothing inevitable about such a process of institutional change; it can fail at each of these stages. For example, at stage 2, proactive organizations may make rapid adjustments to meet frustrated individuals halfway, stifling conflict

23. Eisenstadt, “Social Institutions: The Concept,” 413. He says further that these entrepreneurs are themselves limited by existing institutional norms, but that these are not “fixed” in any given situation: “The process of institutionalization is to a great extent a process of innovation of various appropriate institutional norms and organizational frameworks, as well as a process of setting up, beyond such structural cores and organizational settings, new types of structural frameworks” (414).

24. As Eisenstadt puts it, “it cannot be taken for granted that even if the various potential needs for such crystallization...exist within a society, crystallization will indeed take place and people will be found who are willing and able to invest in the setting up of such norms and organizational frameworks. [But] if such positions do not become crystallized or filled, there may easily develop a disintegration of any given social system or the institutionalization of a system at a very low level of efficiency” (1).
and blunting demands for change. “Hot” pressures for institutional change may be cooled down and channeled into modest organizational reforms. These may include add-ons (for example, establishing an alternative school in the district) or modest changes in curriculum content (such as the addition of multicultural units). Or, at stage 3, despite widely circulated ideas, it may be that no practicable models offering promise of broader implementation are developed, as in the case of the “school network” proposals inspired by Ivan Illich (consider, for example, Philadelphia’s ineffectual Parkway Project).25 Or at stage 5, only insufficiently flexible, radical ideas are put forth, prompting successful counterreactions from mainstream conservatives or liberals or both. American free schools inspired by A.S. Neill’s Summerhill, for example, while in tune with the countercultural 1960s, were damned by the right as havens of teen sex and drug abuse and by the left as politically irrelevant and impotent.26 Lacking political and cultural support in the 1970s, the free school movement simply evaporated.

The Common School and Institutional Change

The emergence of the common school in the form championed by Horace Mann, however, represents a complete institutional transformation that we can consider in terms of the sequence just described.

Stage 1: The district schools of colonial Massachusetts were established to provide basic literacy for the children of agricultural families who could not provide it themselves. Literacy was particularly essential for participation in protestant religious life, and local clergy possessed ex officio membership on the district boards. District schools were only sporadically established in the towns, where urban elites sent their children to secondary-level academies after preliminary study at home or with tutors.

By the 1820s, however, merchant capitalism and shipping had waned as major economic forces in the towns and cities. All arable land was already under cultivation. Industrial factories were concentrating production in towns, and landless farmers and their children were entering the industrial proletariat, working alongside semiliterate Irish, French-Canadian, and Polish Catholic workers.27 John Greenleaf Whittier captured the sense of fundamental change well in describing the industrial town of Lowell in the early 1820s as a “city springing up...as if in a single night,” where an observer would “feel himself...thrust forward into a new century.”28 A new middle class of lawyers, doctors, small businessmen, and commercial workers was rapidly forming in the towns. Allegiance to Jacksonian


democracy among enfranchised working men and among many in the new middle class endangered the Republican Party. Class, political, ethnic, and religious conflicts were rife. Massachusetts had undergone a profound revolution. The schools no longer served social or cultural needs.

Stage 2: Frustrations and complaints about the schools were aired by working-men’s organizations, which rejected the district schools as irrelevant to their aspirations. Many in the new middle class rejected the academies for similar reasons. Catholics protested against the Protestant domination of the schools. New expectations indicated that the entrenched institution was weakening.

Stage 3: Ad hoc experiments in “harmonious training of both the mind and body” to address the concerns of both mental and manual workers, such as the Mechanics Institutes and Manual Labor Schools, were undertaken throughout the 1820s. These were premature attempts to locate organizations in keeping with still inchoate expectations.

Stage 4: Influenced by educational developments in early nineteenth-century Prussia, Republicans [turned Whigs] proposed a new kind of education focused on socializing children from diverse groups to become loyal and harmonious members of the community.

The institutional entrepreneur James G. Carter became the most influential spokesperson for this new education. In popular newspaper articles and books in the 1820s, Carter picked up the various fragments of dissatisfaction with existing schools and proposals for innovation and welded them into a comprehensive system of educational ideas with a detailed plan for their broad implementation. He conceived the project as a complex of elements, all of which were required to root out the “old” education and bring fundamental change. Significantly, Carter was important not as “originator of the awareness of a need for revision of the public schools, but rather because of his ability to crystallize and define an essentially complex situation and offer logical and consistent remedies.”

Under Carter’s influence, the Massachusetts legislature in the 1820s ended official Protestant domination of the district schools by requiring local clergymen who wished to serve on district boards to stand for election. By 1834 the legislature had established a state education fund. Carter himself served in the legislature

32. Clark, James Gordon Carter, 10.
from 1835 through 1837, and in the state senate from 1838 through 1839, as the major Whig legislator on educational issues.

Stage 5: Horace Mann, more established and better-connected than Carter, and then-president of the Massachusetts state senate, was selected as the first secretary of the state board of education after that body was established in legislation written in 1837 by Carter, who was then appointed by Governor Edward Everett as the board’s first member. Mann was the “responsible leader who could be held accountable” for carrying the new educational ideas to fruition. Through extensive school visits and a series of annual reports, he gradually spread the new ideas about aims and organizational means. Under his leadership, state normal schools — which the legislature, despite Carter’s efforts, had rejected in the late 1820s — were finally established. Mann disseminated the “new education” throughout the Northeast and Middle West through *The Common School Journal* and through networking with state educational leaders.

Stage 6: Some of the ideas championed by Mann and his allies were broadly accepted, though others met with opposition from particular factions {entrenched schoolmasters, Roman Catholic clergy, and so on}. Other ideas, such as free tuition for all, gained no traction before the civil war. Through this process of social construction Mann’s common school idea evolved, consolidating its gains and accommodating its losses.

Stage 7: What emerged as the “new public education” in its definitive form, with teacher training colleges, professional certificates, standard instructional practices and subject matters, and shared public expectations — all aligned with the newly emerging social, economic, political and religious institutions — gained full possession of the field in the established Northern states.

Stage 8: Finally, some of the district schools were closed and others were reformed. High schools within the school districts replaced all academies except those able to refashion themselves for niche markets. Catholics built parochial schools. As the nation expanded to the West, people carried the new educational ideas and norms with them. Without any need for further thought, new school organizations were shaped to meet the new institutional expectations. The very notion of “education” had been redefined in the new institutional terms.

**FUNDAMENTAL EDUCATIONAL CHANGE**

What then is “fundamental” educational change, and what does it have to do with education as a social institution? We can construct the relevant sense of “fundamental” by looking at the verb “to found,” which derives from the Latin *fundus*, meaning “bottom.” “To found” in an early use is “to lay the base or sub-structure for” and is more narrowly linked with building something for the *first time*. It was extended from the association with physical buildings to organizations of various kinds, used figuratively to mean “to set up or establish for the first time, with provisions for perpetual maintenance; to originate, create, initiate {something which continues to exist thereafter}; to establish on a firm basis.” Later this was extended
further, to the realm of ideas: “to found” as in “to set up on a basis of underlying reason or principle, to ground.”

The related noun “foundation” goes through a similar evolution, from the substructure first of a building, then to something immaterial, and finally to a system of ideas. A “foundation” is first “the solid ground or base upon which an edifice is constructed.” By the fifteenth century it is also “the basis or groundwork on which something immaterial is raised, or by which it is supported or confirmed,” and later “the ground, principle or reason upon which men act; an understanding or agreement.”

And the adjective “fundamental” goes through the same progression. Its earliest use is “of, or pertaining to, the foundation or base of a building”; then it is extended to mean “serving as the base upon which a thing [chiefly immaterial] is constructed or grounded” (fifteenth century); and it is finally applied to the realm of ideas through the definitions “primary, original, that from which other things are derived [as in basic axioms of a system of propositions]” and “a leading or primary principle, rule, or law which serves as the groundwork of a system.”

In this sense, fundamental change is change in the primary principles, norms, or laws that serve as the basis of a system, whether a pattern of actions or operative ideas. Earlier I indicated that social institutions underlie concrete organizations in this “fundamental” manner. They undergird and authorize these organizations. When institutions, as understood here, change, the concrete organizations they have authorized or ordained become ungrounded; they lose their social “foundation.” They must change to realign with the new institutional arrangements, or they will lose credibility and resources, and ultimately disappear. Meanwhile, new organizations emerge to claim allegiance and resources, and these take their place in the new order.

**Conclusions**

This analysis of educational change gives rise to three broad conclusions. First, fundamental educational change is not primarily about organizations. Fundamental organizational change means readjustment of an existing organization to new institutional ideas and norms. It means putting an existing organization in a new working order, through functional or structural alterations, so that the organization is once again ordained within the institutional order. But fundamental educational change, while encompassing such readjustments in existing organizations, is primarily about change in educational ideas, norms, organizational arrangements, and frameworks that constitute education as a social institution. When these change, new organizations can emerge for ordination, supplementing or even supplanting the old ones. Fundamental change is change in underlying institutions.

Second, the opportunities for fundamental organizational change are dependent upon conditions of the relevant background institution and the other institutions that together form the social system. The public will bring institutional categories into play in assessing innovative ideas put forward as serious candidates
for public commitment by institutional entrepreneurs. But this is not necessarily a conservative force that constrains educational change, as is sometimes suggested. Organizational change is more a matter of institutional *timing* than of the clever strategic ploys of consultants and change agents. Innovative ideas and practices that were initially rejected out of hand as “way out” may eventually be accepted as “right on time.” They may gain attention in popular magazines and journals of opinion, then be shaped by entrepreneurs into small but well-publicized experimental models, and finally be taken in hand by leaders who the public regards as “responsible.” On reaching this stage, they may be capable of recruiting participants and securing resources sufficient to stake a claim in the evolving order. The public might even wonder, what took you so long?

Finally, the anomalies and contradictions of the mainstream system are becoming clearer, particularly in relation to the lack of fit of the schools with the emerging occupational structure. New organizational forms are arising from the grassroots, such as corporate universities, technical academies, convenience universities (the University of Phoenix is the most visible of these), charter schools, and home-school support organizations. These forms, as I said at the beginning of this essay, have largely been ignored by professors and consultants in the field of educational change. Meanwhile, they are components of actual educational change at the institutional level, new organizations grounded in new ideas, values, and norms.

Many opportunities now exist for professors and consultants to contribute to the process of fundamental change, to accelerate it and make it fairer. These opportunities will be greatly enhanced if such agents loosen their own commitments to the mainstream institutional order. What is needed at this point is not reform to save the public schools as we know them, but a new public education defined by new ideas and templates for organizational practice, addressed to the wider public, and compatible with their emerging understandings and values. I would call what we need a new *philosophy of education*, but I am mindful that professional philosophers have been no more successful in framing such ideas and winning public audiences than professional practitioners of educational change have been in bringing about significant and lasting change.