

# **Change by Decree (##)**

## Change by Decree

By Alfie Kohn

Everyone is opposed to making educators implement lousy ideas – “lousy” being defined as something the speaker doesn’t like. But it’s a lot more challenging to take a stand against – and, if you’re in a position of relative power, to refuse to engage in – the practice of forcing educators to implement ideas you think are terrific.

In fact, we might say that true leaders are those who recognize that the quality of an idea doesn’t justify an attempt to shove it down people’s throats. Nor does it increase the likelihood that such an effort will be successfully digested. The idea will eventually just be, um, coughed back up. I’ve been collecting articles about educational administrators and other officials who have tried to make various policy changes only to have their heads handed to them. These changes include some I favor (replacing grades with meaningful reports of student progress), some I oppose (defunding various programs to subsidize more on-line classes), and some about which I have mixed feelings (shifting from lectures to guided discovery in an effort to raise test scores). No doubt the affected teachers and parents had a range of reactions to the substance of each proposal. But mostly they seem to have resented change by decree.

Many of us have been appalled by the behaviorist, corporate-styled policies known collectively as “school reform.” Its biggest proponents typically don’t know the first thing about pedagogy or assessment, so they rely on test scores as a marker for improvement – even though schools may become worse even as their scores climb. But what about educational theorists who know quite a bit about pedagogy and assessment – whose writings, in fact, eloquently explain the importance of having students construct ideas rather than passively absorb facts and skills – but who share with the clueless managerial types a belief that it’s possible to improve what teachers do by fiat? Their assumption is that the best and brightest can (and should) reach into classrooms and *make* the instruction more thoughtful.

Consider the experts who have actively endorsed – not merely shrugged and passively accepted – the one-size-fits-all national Common Core “State” Standards. Their hope presumably was to use a project initiated by corporate executives, governors, and testing companies as a vehicle for improving teaching. But these experts may eventually reconsider – not only because of the nightmare of national testing that core standards will spawn, but because there will be massive (if passive) resistance from teachers. And

I believe there should be resistance.

Beyond the moral objections, such efforts inevitably backfire. Good teaching can’t be imposed from above because it “doesn’t rest on specific practices but on how well the educator actively thinks through hundreds of decisions that no program can script,” as Maja Wilson pointed out in *Phi Delta Kappan*. To try to mandate such practices “paradoxically creates the kind of environment that undermines good teaching ... by stunt[ing] teachers’ ability to make good decisions.”

In the end, policy makers and consultants cannot change what goes on in classrooms. All they can do is invite teachers to change what *they* do in classrooms.

To most teachers, it makes little difference if the marching orders come from the Department of Education or from the local school board. They’re still orders. The model is still based on demanding (“Beginning next year...”) rather than supporting (“What do you need? How can we help?”). Similarly, to parents in your district, the question won’t be whether a change you’ve just announced is sensible so much as whether they were consulted.

The paradox is almost painful when the new policy or program is about collaboration – say, an effort to create a sense of community in schools. (I’m less interested in number-crunching initiatives that cynically appropriate the *language* of “learning communities.”) Three cheers when administrators want to shift their district’s style from “doing to” to “working with.” But that shift cannot itself be done to people.

When a mandate is handed down from the state capital, you, too, may be angry – particularly if it’s idiotic, but even if it isn’t. Your job then is to be a buffer, protecting those who report to you from its worst effects rather than robotically implementing and enforcing what doesn’t make sense. But keep your initial irritation fresh in your mind in case you’re ever tempted to imitate those who are higher up on the food chain by treating teachers the same way you’ve been treated.

It’s not just about “getting buy-in” for your pet idea, a phrase that often comes across as patronizing because the focus is on strategies for deflecting resistance. True leaders are committed to a process that’s genuinely respectful and collaborative, something closer to democratic decision-making from the beginning. If that’s missing – if you expect people to get with the program just because you’ve told them it’s good for kids – then you’ll be viewed with suspicion and your idea will never take root.

As the management theorist Peter Scholtes used to say, “People don’t resist change. They resist being changed.”

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