



Rethinking Schools: 30 years of teacher activism

By Stan Karp

After the first issue came out, Bob Peterson was called down to his principal's office and told, "Be careful."

"What?" he asked incredulously. "What do you mean?"

"It's like the McCarthy-era down at central office," the principal warned. "People are talking about you and your paper."

"I'm a troublemaker because I oppose the basal reader?" Bob persisted.

"I can't say any more," said the principal. "Just be careful."

Bob Peterson, a veteran educator who's never been especially good at being "careful," was recalling official reaction many years ago to the first edition of *Rethinking Schools*, a teacher-run publication that this year is celebrating an unlikely 30th anniversary. For three decades, the journal has been at the center one of the most effective teacher-led activist projects in the country.

Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, during an earlier era of top-down school reform, *Rethinking Schools* has grown from the brainchild of a small teacher-discussion group to a vibrant citywide newspaper to its current status as an influential quarterly magazine and publisher of educational resources for teaching social justice and advocating for better public schools.

The group took shape in the mid-80s when a Reagan-era report titled "A Nation At Risk" sparked a national debate about the status of U.S. public education. A slew of think tank reports, blue-ribbon commissions and governors' summits followed, with top-down prescriptions to "reform" schools and classrooms, often without the participation of those who worked in them.

Against this background, teacher-activists in Milwaukee began looking for ways to push back.

"We wanted to stop being on the defensive all the time," recalls Peterson, a founding editor who was a bilingual fifth-grade teacher and, years later, was twice elected president of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association. "We were tired of constantly trooping down to the school board meetings to stave off yet another attack on teachers and decent education programs."

A critical edge from the start

The small group of mostly K-12 classroom teachers launched *Rethinking Schools* as a teacher-run newspaper distributed free

throughout the city. It provided a vehicle to analyze and respond to the maze of reform proposals raining down upon them. It was also an organizing project that required building a network of supporters willing to distribute the paper in Milwaukee's neighborhoods and 150 schools, and ready to take action when the need arose.

From the start, *Rethinking Schools* also had a critical edge. "We wanted to have an impact on the way teachers thought about school issues," Peterson says, "and not just uncritically defend the role teachers were playing in a flawed system. Teachers need to be challenged both through critique and through examples of things that work."

They began by taking on that staple of daily school life, the basal reader. Basals are those sequential, artificially constructed reading books with comprehension questions at the end of each story and matching workbooks. Basals are where kids first find reading turned into "schoolwork."

"See John. See Sally. See how they hate school."

For students who succeed easily in school, basals may pose no more serious problem than boredom. But for the growing numbers of students struggling early on, basals can be the beginning of lifelong frustration with the system's expectations and demands. Moreover, *Rethinking Schools'* editors knew that reading was a key source of educational anxiety for all concerned, and that traditional, mechanistic approaches to the teaching and assessment of reading skills might be a good place to begin criticizing a whole web of related ideas. They were right.

In November 1986 the first issue of *Rethinking Schools* appeared, with a lead article by kindergarten teacher Rita Tenorio titled "Confessions of a Kindergarten Teacher: Surviving Scott Foresman." It was a firsthand account that laid out the negative implications

of what the basics testers and textbook publishers had in store for school kids. “The administrators in [Milwaukee Public Schools] and many school systems across the country are responding to pressures to improve our schools by extending the questionable basal reading program downward to the kindergarten,” she wrote. “Apparently their theory is that the earlier we begin the workbooks, the earlier the students will read, and the earlier they will be ‘on level.’”

Instead, *Rethinking Schools* promoted strategies that de-emphasized workbook pages and fragmented skill drills in favor of teaching activities that encouraged children to communicate, exchange ideas, address individual needs and interests, and use language skills purposefully to explore the world around them.

An accompanying editorial tied these pedagogical issues to larger reform trends. It criticized efforts to change schools by instituting “systems management,” which moved authority from classrooms to administrative bureaucracies, served the interests of textbook and test publishers, and de-skilled educators by proposing “teacher-proof” curriculums.

The newspaper continued to publicize the issue, digesting a large body of educational research about “whole language” alternatives to basal-based reading instruction and making it available to readers, including school board members and other policymakers who were personally lobbied on the matter. The campaign eventually convinced Milwaukee Public Schools to reject citywide adoption of a single basal program in favor of a system that gave teachers a choice of methods and materials, including ten whole language pilot programs.

In a relatively brief time, *Rethinking Schools* had raised an issue, educated its readers about the implications, and won a significant, if small, victory. It went on to reproduce this mix of analysis with action on a host of other educational issues from curriculum and instruction to school governance and collective bargaining to social issues beyond schoolhouse walls.

A progressive approach to classroom practice

As the core of editors expanded to include teachers from other parts of the country, *Rethinking Schools*’ reach and ambition grew. In 1992, in response to the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ voyage, it produced a teacher’s guide called *Rethinking Columbus*. This impressive collection of resources, lesson plans, and stories sold several hundred thousand copies and changed the way teachers across the country presented this history to students. It also reflected *Rethinking Schools*’ progressive approach to classroom practice, emphasizing role plays, student voice, and a robust, anti-racist multiculturalism in place of conventional, teacher-centered classroom activities and standardized, sanitized curriculum.

Rethinking Columbus was followed by *Rethinking Our Classrooms*, a collection of curriculum and teaching pieces that deepened *Rethinking Schools*’ vision of classrooms as places of deep critical inquiry and democratic values, with healthy measures of joy, hope, and community.

Today, *Rethinking Schools* resources include more than two dozen teacher-produced titles. These inexpensive, attractive publications reflect the experience and wisdom of practicing teachers working to build equity and social justice in their classrooms and communities. They cover the K-12 spectrum and a wide range of curriculum themes from immigration (*The Line Between Us*) and language arts (*Teaching for Joy and Justice: Reading, Writing and Rising Up*) to climate change and globalization (*A People’s Curriculum for the Earth*). There are collections on “rethinking” math, multiculturalism, early childhood, popular culture, poetry and more. The popular *New Teacher Book* is an especially valuable

resource for preservice and early-career teachers and is also one of the few books for new teachers that directly addresses the role and importance of teacher unions.

The group’s most recent titles tackle thorny issues of *Rethinking Sexism, Gender and Sexuality* and *Rethinking Bilingual Education*. Other publications have addressed policy issues such as vouchers, testing, and top-down school reform. All are shaped by *Rethinking Schools*’ combination of activist, social justice critique and hopeful vision.

Expanding into social media

In recent years, *Rethinking Schools*, which can be found online at rethinkingschools.org, has also expanded its presence on social media, with 75,000 “likes” on its Facebook page and nearly 20,000 Twitter followers. In partnership with activists at Teaching for Change, *Rethinking Schools* also maintains the Zinn Education Project (ZEP), named for the famous historian Howard Zinn. ZEP provides an archive of curriculum resources, many drawn from *Rethinking Schools* publications, that over 60,000 registered users can access free of charge. ZEP’s Facebook page also provides a popular “This Day in History” feature to more than 250,000 visitors. When a state legislator recently introduced a bill to ban the use of Zinn’s work in Arkansas public schools, ZEP made Zinn’s classic *A People’s History of the United States* available upon request to hundreds of Arkansas teachers free of charge.

A valuable resource for New Jersey teachers

New Jersey teachers and teacher-educators have found *Rethinking Schools* a valuable resource in multiple ways. Eileen Heddy of The College of New Jersey says, “I use *Rethinking Schools* materials nearly every week in my classes. I tell my students that if they only get one professional periodical, it should be *Rethinking Schools*. It really pushes my students to think beyond their own experiences and provides so many important and useful materials for the classroom.”

Montclair State University assistant professor Bree Picower calls *The New Teacher Book* “a trusted staple in my practice of preparing aspiring educators. No other text prepares them for that nerve-racking next step of entering their first classroom like receiving the sage advice from experienced educators who have made it through... It is the one book that my students thank me for assigning.”

Picower’s colleagues, Monica Taylor and Doug Larkin, use a number of articles in their teacher prep courses, citing the introduction to *Rethinking Our Classrooms* as an especially good summary of what teaching for social justice is about.

Engaging material across the curriculum

At Montclair High School, Shana Stein has used *Rethinking Schools* and ZEP materials to build engaging units for her civics and government classes. “Students love the role plays and anything interactive where they’re debating and arguing,” she says. “Just a few weeks ago I did the Seneca Falls Convention [for women’s rights] based on a role play that includes people who weren’t really there: such as enslaved Africans, African-American women, Cherokee women.”

Each year, the high school’s Civics and Government Institute holds an annual “social reform panel” event.

“We study revolutionaries and reformers in U.S. history,” Stein explains. “The kids come dressed as those people and it’s a huge event, kids love it.”

It’s typical of the kind of teaching *Rethinking Schools* encourages

At EdCamp Revolution on April 1, members and the community engage engaged in the professional practices envisioned by *Rethinking Schools*. Here NJEA member Awo Okaikor Aryee-Price facilitates a session titled "What is Critical Pedagogy?" With her is Matthew Fratelli.



Students also participated in EdCamp, including Fady Sait Fleur and Avery Julien.



At EdCamp, Stan Karp speaks with Dr. Michelle Fine of the Graduate Center, CUNY.



EdCamp attendees complete post-it notes to propose sessions. From left: Dave Zirkle, Thomas Whitaker, Dena Grushkin, Daniela Ceballos, and Kevin Flanagan.



and supports.

"There are so many great ideas. It makes you feel like someone is looking out for you; that you can do this kind of teaching and really challenge your students because there's a community of people supporting social justice teaching," Stein adds. "So much of teaching can be isolating. You think you're the only one thinking about these things. To read what other teachers are doing and see the creative work happening in your field makes you feel like a professional and that what you're doing is really important work. You get a sense of the possibilities. I've been inspired by teachers I've never met."

Digging deep in to culture

Language arts teacher Awo Okaikor Aryee-Price, who has taught in Jersey City and Hackensack, recalls using Linda Christensen's lesson on "Where I'm From" poems from *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*.

"I used that with every level I taught because it allowed students to dig deep and showcase their culture in their own kind of way," Aryee-Price says. "A lot of kids find poetry intimidating, this helped students see themselves as writers." Christensen, the Director of the Oregon Writing Project and a *Rethinking Schools* editor and classroom teacher for more than 30 years, will be the featured presenter at NJEA's Teaching and Learning Symposium on Oct. 14. (For details go to njea.org/tlsymposium.)

For world language and ESL teacher Kevin LaMastra, *Rethinking Schools* opened doors that led far beyond his Linden classroom. As part of an effort to create authentic, real world curriculum about globalization and immigration issues, *Rethinking Schools* editors Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson led several groups of teachers on trips to the U.S.-Mexican border. LaMastra joined one of the early tours and was inspired.

"We were learning about globalization on both sides of the border from people on the ground and in the communities that were directly affected," LaMastra recalls. "It was the kind of perspective reflected in the magazine itself; making teachers the experts and giving voice to the students, their parents, and the communities while respecting home cultures."

Teaching for justice

LaMastra was so motivated by this combination of real-world learning and teacher-made curricula, that he used it as a model to develop his own teacher tours to the Dominican Republic. The trips, which he has conducted for more than a decade, have attracted interest from teachers across the country and developed lasting people-to-people ties and projects. They also provided rich curriculum ideas for LaMastra's middle school French and ESL students. He found classroom activities such as "The Chairs of Inequality" from *Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World* "helpful in my own learning in conjunction with the travel experience. It helped shape my own understanding of globalization and informed me of the possibilities of doing social justice work as a teacher."

"Being a social justice educator is not always about the specific content you're sharing with students," adds LaMastra. "It's the relationships in the classroom between students and teachers. It's everything you do, from the poster you put up to the movie you decide to show to the bulletin boards you create, everything has an effect and creates a message."

Facilitating difficult conversations

In South Orange-Maplewood, Columbia High School teacher Thomas Whitaker has used *Rethinking Schools* resources in his challenging work on race.

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Rethinking Schools is a quarterly magazine filled with teacher-written stories about anti-racist, anti-sexist, multicultural teaching in K–12 classrooms; policy analysis to help educators make sense of the forces shaping our schools and our students’ lives; and inspiring news about education activism.

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“Over the last two years I have been conducting workshops for elementary and middle school parents on institutional racism, police brutality, white privilege, and other social justice issues,” says Whitaker. “I have used materials from RS to facilitate these discussions” citing ‘10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children’s Books for Racism and Sexism,’ and RS interviews with authors Michelle Alexander, who wrote *The New Jim Crow*, and Enid Lee, whose discussion about “Taking Multicultural, Anti-Racist Education Seriously” is among the group’s most popular pieces.

“Teaching in a diverse community offers not only the opportunity, but the necessity of promoting anti-bias work for the victims,” Whitaker says, “as well as solutions for those who perpetrate the injustice. RS provides ways for teachers to pass these tools on to parents and caregivers.”

A resource for parents

Parents have expressed appreciation for *Rethinking Schools* too—including some famous ones. Academy-award winning actor and public school advocate Matt Damon was introduced to *Rethinking Schools* by his mother, Nancy Carlsson-Paige, a longtime teacher and early-childhood expert. He’s been a supporter ever since: “As the parent of four girls, I want my daughters’ teachers to combine the teaching of academic skills with values of justice, equality, and environmental sensitivity—values that are expressed in every issue of *Rethinking Schools*.”

For a small, nonprofit, grassroots, teacher-activist project like *Rethinking Schools* to celebrate a 30th anniversary is, in many ways, remarkable. It’s also a testament to how the group’s vision has resonated with teachers through the nation and the world that “classrooms can be places of hope, where students and teachers gain glimpses of the kind of society we could live in and where students learn the academic and critical skills needed to make that vision a reality.” 🏡

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