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# Talking About Their Generations

by William Strauss

## Making sense of a school environment made up of Gen-Xers and Millennials

“**T**his is the thought that wakes me up in the middle of the night. When I get older, these kids are gonna take care of me,” bemoans Principal Richard Vernon, a baby boomer, in “The Breakfast Club,” a 1985 film about five rebellious high school students who are assigned Saturday detention.

Given his attitude, Vernon might have been even more horrified had he realized that 20 years later “these kids” would themselves be the parents of teen-agers—and by the 2010s these Generation Xers would be running the nation’s schools.

New generations come and go, and we shouldn’t be surprised that each thinks differently from the previous, but they do, and we are. Boomers haven’t quite figured out Generation X. What they think they have figured out, they often don’t respect or appreciate for its significance in shaping the future.

Right now, significant changes are happening in K-12 classrooms, in the teacher corps, in the administration offices, in homes and in state and local governance as the older generation is gradually giving way to its successors. The consequences of these transitions help explain much of what is going on in K-12 education today. They also offer insights into what is likely to happen on America’s campuses by the end of this decade and how the ranks of school superintendents are likely to change.

Before we explore the implications of this transition of generations, let’s define them:

- G.I. Generation: Born 1901–1924, currently ages 80-104;
- Silent Generation: Born 1925–1942, currently ages 62-80;
- Boom Generation: Born 1943–1960, currently ages 44-62;
- Generation X: Born 1961–1981, currently ages 23-44; and

- Millennial Generation: Born since 1982, currently ages 23 and younger.

The latter four generations are central to the story of today’s K-12 education.

### Silents and Boomers

The members of the Silent Generation are the children of the Great Depression and World War II. They passed through elementary and secondary schools during the 1930s and ’40s, were teachers from the 1950s through the ’90s, worked as school administrators until recently and are now nearly all retired from those careers.

These educators set the tone for the nation’s schools during the 1970s and ’80s, a time of experimentation, and they remained influential on campuses during the 1990s. Of all of today’s generations, the silents seem to be the most critical of today’s teachers and students. They are also the wealthiest Americans and are still important as taxpayers, voters, and trustees and senior faculty of many universities.

The boomers are America’s post-World War II generation. They passed through school during a time of strong community and civic confidence, when the teaching profession was at a height of public prestige and was dominated by a well-educated batch of G.I. Generation women who often hit a glass ceiling in their professions.

The first boomers entered college in the early 1960s, when university life was unusually welcoming (and yielding) to youth. By the end of that decade, they had turned campus life upside down with protests and riots. For many well-educated boomers, especially those born in the 1940s, college was like their Normandy—the generational experience that brought them together. For the most part, today’s boomers, now in their 50s, look back on their K-12 experience fondly

and acknowledge they benefited from a fine education.

While boomer women were less likely to go into teaching than had been true for the prior two generations, teaching at the K-12 and university levels remained a high-prestige occupation. Just as important, boomer parents saw public schools as institutions of purpose and meaning and they saw college as a desirable, even essential destination for their own children. They dominated the ranks of public school parent organizations during the 1980s. This has brought active, often annoying, but on the whole supportive parents into the education arena.

Boomer teachers have dominated America's K-12 classrooms for the past two decades. They also comprise the vast majority of superintendents and are now at their peak of influence in universities, the U.S. Congress and the White House. What are they doing with this authority? The same generation that once demanded "unconditional amnesty," pass-fail courses and a "don't fold, spindle or mutilate" anti-computer ethos is now imposing zero tolerance, more homework and a wide array of tests on their own children.

### **Gen-X Factor**

Gen-Xers were raised in an era that put the needs of children last. A how-to parenting guide published by the feminist Boston Women's Collective, titled "Ourselves and Our Children," advanced the notion that placing the needs of the self ahead of those of the child was indeed the right childrearing technique for the era's new way of thinking. A survey cited in the professional journal *Demography* in 1984 revealed that a generation earlier, during the peak of the boomer-child era, half of all adult women believed that parents in bad marriages should stay together for the sake of the children, but by the early '80s (the peak years for the divorce rate), only one in five thought so.

From the late 1960s into the early 1980s, the nation passed through a period when many aspects of life became less protective of, even more apprehensive about, small children. A "new realism" movement in children's literature gave the nation's young people the how-tos of dealing with everything from crime to latchkeys to divorce. Hollywood depicted fledgling Gen-Xers as mean

and evil; at best, they were Willy Wonka brats, "Kramer vs. Kramer" inconveniences, or the hard-edged kids of "Paper Moon."

Major social crusades were fought in the classroom as young men avoided the Vietnam-era draft by becoming K-12 teachers. Through the 1970s, the median age of teachers fell sharply as did teacher pay, thanks to surging inflation. Open classrooms were the rage, along with new math (anti-basics) and self-esteem movements, experiential learning, "sensitive" and "accessible" textbooks and the Summerhillian concept that children learned best when left alone with learning tools. In line with reformer Roland Barth's theory that no minimum body of knowledge is essential for everyone to know, standards were weakened. The average amount of time children spent on homework fell to half what it had been two decades earlier.

### **Change of Pace**

The 1980s brought the end to the "Consciousness Revolution," and along came the great K-12 pullback. The adults changed their minds about experiential learning. The new consensus was there is an essential body of knowledge, and this generation wasn't taught it.

In 1983, the U.S. Department of Education's "A Nation at Risk" report bemoaned the "rising tide of mediocrity" in America's public schools. As Gen-Xers dominated America's high schools and flooded into colleges during the 1980s, they heard one expert commission after another deride their schools as failures, their teachers as incapable, and they themselves as somewhere between disappointing and stupid.

In 1987, Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* declared students' minds were, indeed, quite closed. Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn, in their book, *What Do Seventeen-Year-Olds Know?* answered, "Not much." Grading this teenage generation in 29 subjects, they dished out 20 F's and no grade higher than a C-minus.

Perhaps the most revealing comment on Gen-X school achievement came from a late-1980s study by Pepperdine University's Michael Gose, who asked long-time teachers who had taught boomers in the 1960s and Gen-Xers in the 1980s to compare the two student generations in 43 measures of

aptitude and achievement. The teachers rated boomers higher, sometimes much higher, in fundamental skills, academic inclination, task orientation, morals and ethics, communication skills and willingness to work hard for the purpose of learning.

At first glance, the result was a boomer rout: 38 to 4, with one tie. But the few realms where Gen-Xers outscored boomers were telling: skills in negotiation, defenses to prevent extreme dependency on parents or authorities, interacting with adults on an equitable basis and knowing where to go for business, consumer or personal wants and needs.

The Gen-X students of the 1980s, Gose concluded, were "more aware of what's going on, how institutions work, how to manage social relations, how to cope with adults and how to get things done," and these students were "sharper than ever, even if not in quite the same ways I, as one of their teachers, would like them to be."

### **Making a Mark**

When they graduated from college, Gen-Xers considered education to be a less prestigious career path than had previous generations and were less likely to view their peers who entered teaching as the best of their generation. Beginning teacher salaries began to rise, even as criticism of public schools mounted. The Gen-Xers became the young teachers of the late 1980s and the Teach for America corps of the early '90s. Today they constitute most teachers.

Meanwhile, this generation the U.S. government had labeled as mediocre became the greatest entrepreneurial and job-creating generation in U.S. history. They began making their mark as parents when their children entered day care and preschool in the mid-1990s. By the year 2000, they led the ranks of elementary school PTAs.

Today, most of America's middle school parents and just under half of high school parents are Gen-Xers. Within a few years, they will be a majority of collegiate parents. At every level, they have been fierce protectors of their children.

Politically, Gen-Xers show a clear split between Democrat and Republican, which has clear implications for education. Those who are single and childless are a liberal Democratic voting

bloc (albeit light voting), while those who are married with children are among the most conservative Republican voters. Gen-X parents appear to be staunch defenders of the precepts of No Child Left Behind. They have supported school accountability, parental choice, charter schools, vouchers and home-schooling. They now control the education budgets in a number of states.

Determined to avoid the mistakes they believe the Silent Generation parents and educators made when they were growing up, the Gen-X parents are protective of their children and family time and cynical about schools and other public institutions. They look back on their education with less warmth than do the boomers, are far more skeptical of public schools and show a far keener interest in education's bottom lines.

### **On the Rise**

About half of the Millennials are the offspring of boomers and half are the children of Gen-Xers. Through the late 1980s, Millennials displaced Gen-Xers as the K-3 school-age population. By the mid-'90s, the leading-edge Millennials were in middle school and by the late '90s had entered high school. This fall, the first cohort is in the second year of graduate school. By the end of this decade, they'll dominate in law and business schools, doctorate programs and other postgraduate programs. In other words, the Millennials fill the ranks at all levels of education.

Then and now, Millennials have been the center of attention in ways Gen-Xers were not, at the center of a culture war over family values spawned by opposing coalitions among the boomers, who set much of the tone for the Millennials' upbringing and schooling.

Today's young people are criticized, as have been all past generations of teen-agers, yet they are depicted in a more positive light than their predecessors in everything from media to movies to music to marketing. For example, you can see this on "The Scholar," a new ABC-TV reality show about 10 high school seniors who must use their book smarts, creativity and leadership skills to compete for a full scholarship to the college of their choice.

## **Finding Meaning**

In a nutshell, then, this is what school leaders currently encounter:

Millennials are the entire K-12 and traditional-age college population. Starting last year, they began joining the ranks of brand new teachers.

Gen-Xers comprise most of today's K-8 parents and a rising share of high school parents. They are only a small percentage of school administrators, but they account for more than half the K-12 teachers and are clearly on the rise.

Boomers are a declining share of K-12 parents but still dominate the ranks of high school PTAs. They are the older K-12 teachers (including those on the brink of retirement), and most of the administrators. Their influence on K-12 education is at its peak and will soon start to wane.

What does this mean for schools? What should school leaders know and do about this generational lineup, and the changes that will come over the next several years?

First, let's first consider today's parents. The Gen-X factor will be of rising importance at the high school level over the next several years. They currently comprise most of the parents at the elementary and middle school levels, and every year they will increase their influence on the secondary school environment through parent organizations and public institutions and as individuals.

Boomer parents (the parents of high schoolers) are more likely to trust the education system—even if they loudly advocate reforming it. They also are likely to support public education as a social and symbolic cause and to accept what they perceive as rules that serve the common good. While they want to have a personal connection with teachers, they will be more inclined to trust them.

By contrast, Gen-Xers will assume they will have easy and direct access to teachers and expect to have transparency and accountability in everything from grading to safety. They will want access to information, including the credentials of their children's teachers, the curricula they plan to use and the semester teaching plan.

Where boomers have been more willing to view education in its larger societal context, Gen-X parents will tend to want the best possible education for their own children, period. They take

more interest in local rather than national education issues and are more pragmatic, favoring proven and cost-effective solutions to problems. They are less likely to tolerate a teacher they see as ineffective and are more skeptical about procedures that make it difficult for teachers to be replaced. And when they help out at school, their focus is on enriching their own children's learning.

Boomer parents generally want children to learn basic values and standards, while Gen-X parents' concerns are more definable. Many Gen-Xers believe K-12 education should impart needed life and career skills, follow certifiable methods, be totally safe and, from a child's standpoint, more fun and less pressured. These are security moms, not soccer moms. They are more focused on efficiency and service.

Gen-Xers also want schools to make their lives easier. They want schools to use technology to keep them updated in detail and in real time—much like what they would expect from Amazon.com or Federal Express. They expect schools to market directly to them, telling them why they are the best choice for their child.

Boomer parents are more likely to try to work through differences and difficulties with the local schools, whereas the less-loyal Gen-X parents are more inclined to move their children out of public schools and are more mindful of the alternative menu of choices: charters, magnets, private and parochial schools and home schooling. They also are aware of how each school (and teacher) is faring in terms of No Child Left Behind requirements.

## **Bridging the Gap**

What about teachers? What's the Gen-X factor there? As is true for parents, each generation produces all kinds of teachers, but here again, some patterns are clear.

Boomers comprise the older teacher corps (mid-40s on up). On the whole, today's older teachers are acknowledged to have greater experience and substantive understanding of subject areas, along with a stronger commitment to teaching as a vocation, as a civic duty and as a reflection of their personal values. They may have greater passion for long hours and special projects (whether paid or not).

Gen-X teachers (those in their early 40s and younger) are, as a group, showing more dedication to lifelong learning and their ability to adapt to new conditions. They are willing to collaborate with others and to accept and apply advice from administrators or teacher peers. They have a far greater knowledge base and comfort level in learning, using and applying technologies. Therefore, compared to boomers, they have a greater desire to accept (and try to lift) measures of classroom productivity, are more comfortable with incentives and are more willing to confront competition and allow parental choice.

One consequence of this generational difference is that Gen-X teachers are more open than boomers to the new demands of the No Child Left Behind law and its various assessment and reporting requirements.

But perhaps the greatest advantage Gen-X teachers have over boomers is knowing how to deal with Gen-X parents. Younger parents may be inclined to see the older boomer teachers as argumentative or arrogant, to view in them what they may dislike in some of their workplace supervisors. Boomer teachers may show too little regard for the knowledge and values of younger parents.

Millennial teachers are just now entering the profession, and any effort to recruit and train them should take full account of how they are different from older generations and what this means for schools. It's important to address the seven core traits described by Neil Howe, my co-author on several books (See related article.) In particular, school leaders stress the prestige of the profession, the civic purpose of education and the capacity of teachers to enjoy a balanced life with more free time than many other occupations.

### **Generations and Learning**

When the last boomer superintendents retire in about 10 years, America's schools will be fully a Gen-X and Millennial teaching environment, serving a new generation of K-6 (and, in time, K-12) students. One way to encourage high-quality Gen-Xers to move up through the administrative ranks is to help them lay groundwork for their own agenda, borne of their own generational experiences.

Administrators should foster a climate of respect for each generation's strengths and of help and support for their weaknesses. They should encourage Gen-X teachers to appreciate the boomer approach to curriculum, values and the civic purposes of their profession. And they should encourage boomers to appreciate how well Gen-Xers handle technology, parents and No Child Left Behind.

In promoting mutual respect across the generations, it's important to keep Millennials in mind as well. They deserve a warm welcome and a helping hand without the condescension and implicit criticism with which young Gen-Xers were so often greeted by older people in the workplace a decade or two ago. The fact that Millennials get along so well with their parents and with other people their parents' age is a definite plus. It will be helpful to encourage fortyish Gen-X teachers to appreciate the fresh ideas and new set of experiences young Millennial teachers bring to the classroom and to help the latter understand the value of the life and work experience of their older colleagues.

Each generation brings something new and important to teaching and learning. That's why it's so important for school administrators to understand, respect and address the generational differences in today's schools. ■

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