

Who has taken control of defining schools?

The consequences are devastating. Carl Bossard calls for a change.

by Beat Schaller, *Sichtweisenschweiz.ch*



Beat Schaller. (Picture *sichtweisenschweiz.ch*)

What is taught in schools and how it is taught is now determined by a small circle of educators: bureaucratically isolated, academically aloof and largely disconnected from the reality of school life.

The consequences are devastating for teachers, pupils, parents, the economy and society.

In a thought-provoking interview, Carl Bossard shows who is challenged, what works and how the educational shift for 21st-century schools can be achieved – astutely, expertly and conclusively.*

SICHTWEISENSCHWEIZ.CH: *You live in Stans in the canton of Nidwalden, the very place where the great Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi worked in 1798/1799. Not only we, but Pestalozzi also lived in turbulent times. In your opinion, what can Pestalozzi teach today's schools?*

Carl Bossard: Much of everyday teaching can be reduced to three points or divided into three parts. We are familiar with this, for example, from the educational triangle involving the teacher, the young people and the learning content. It is within this triangle that the cognitive and social learning processes of young people take place: a triad.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi demonstrated this with his educational triad of head, heart and hands. He knew how important education is for young people and that everything must be developed together: the feelings in the heart, the sharpness of the mind and the dexterity of the hands. He understood this, taught it, and often

failed in practice. But he tried with spirited passion. That is why he had an impact on children. His moving "Letter from Stans" from 1799 bears eloquent witness to this.¹

As Pestalozzi taught, the "three big Gs" (Grundwissen, Grundfertigkeiten, Grundhaltungen) are important: basic knowledge, basic skills, basic attitudes. A pedagogical-didactic triad that cannot become obsolete because it represents something like a NON-PLUS ULTRA.

Our children need to know something, they need to be able to do something, and both together should enable them to think and act better.

Only in this way, through the micro-processes of learning, can we achieve what is fundamental and, in times of fake news, AI and Chat-GPT, absolutely indispensable: education as "unseducibility". This is how the German philosopher *Hans Blumenberg* put it. But this requires basic skills such as reading and thinking. These are the result of systematic learning and creative working. This must be the goal of school.

And there is something else that seems very important and relevant to me. Pestalozzi was one of the first to move away from individual learning and joint teaching. Until then, each child learned somehow on their own and with their own resources. Learning together for a shared world: something revolutionary! Today, we are tending to dissolve the class community again through individualised learning. And if the Bertelsmann Foundation and IT companies have their way, in the future every pupil will learn on their own, isolated and with digital devices in their own learning boxes. The class as a social space will no longer exist. A problematic reform!

* Beat Schaller: "With the launch of the online platform *SICHTWEISENSCHWEIZ.CH*, I am personally taking on responsibility and humbly and confidently making a public contribution to the success of Switzerland. I invite interested individuals and organisations to participate in various ways. There are many possibilities." (<https://sichtweisenschweiz.ch/ueber-uns/sichtweisen-schweiz/>)

**Dr. phil. *Carl Bossard* was principle of the Nidwalden Cantonal Grammar School in Stans, director of the Alpenquai Grammar School in Lucerne, and founding principal of the PH Zug University of Teacher Education. He regularly publishes on educational and education policy, historical, and social topics. He currently works as a course instructor, speaker, school advisor, and lecturer at Heidelberg University of Education.

Do educational prophets and educational revolutionaries today equate education with reform? What do they mean by this?

It must be “new” and innovative. Almost everything that is considered important is declared “new”. This brings applause and acceptance. Many already consider the “new” to be better and eo ipso superior to the “old”. That goes without saying; no one wants to be considered old-fashioned. Education is particularly susceptible to this, and with it education policy – out of concern that it is no longer in keeping with the times.

The anthropological constants are forgotten, and what always applies – because we are human beings – is ignored.

Human evolution cannot be equated with technical innovation. But that is what is happening. And where people no longer reflect, they deflect – with new terms and slogans: “new learning”, for example, or “new learning culture”, or even “new authority”.

In the cascade of reforms in recent years, we have also forgotten what the philosopher and educator *Eduard Spranger* called the “law of unintended side effects”. Let me give you an example: when we expand something, the counter vector, practice, is minimised. We have expanded the content in primary school by introducing foreign languages at an early age. In return, the time for consolidation, automation and application is reduced and minimised.

We cannot maximise both vectors at the same time: expanding the content *and* at the same time expanding practice. The law of counterbalancing!

As the night grows longer, the day recedes and becomes shorter. This has nothing to do with ideology. It is simply a matter of proportional calculation. The consequences are evident in declining learning performance, such as reading comprehension and coherent writing. The law of unintended side effects!

Another issue related to the law of counterbalancing: how are the vectors between family and school, between upbringing and teaching, changing and shifting? What are the consequences for primary school?

School has a harder time today than it did a few years ago. It has lost many of its silent allies – those unpaid workers who once contributed as a matter of course: for example, the support of



Carl Bossard – probably one of the most reflective Swiss educators of the present day. (Picture ma)

parents and their subsidiary educational efforts at home. In the past, parents tended to side with the teacher. Today, this is often different – with noticeable consequences for everyday school life.

Some parents remove all obstacles from their children’s path. Not every child therefore has the right *not* to be spoiled. But learning is hard work and requires commitment and perseverance. In this sense, schools must counteract this, sometimes even creating a counterworld. This has always been part of their mission. Young people become strong through resistance, not through pampering.

Because these forces are becoming weaker in the home, schools today must act more strongly against the tide and activate counterforces. This is challenging. In his book on education, the poet *Jean Paul* argues that children should also be educated *against the spirit of the times*, because it has enough influence anyway. Children and young people need a counterforce, a sense of self, a resistance. Only in this way can they acquire the maturity and freedom that is rightly demanded – and the resilience that is so often talked about today.

This is the dialectic of the school’s educational mission: to go with the world, but at the same time to resist it.

Where others talk at length about undesirable developments in schools, you illuminate the connections with just a few words: “Curricula are increasing – learning performance is declining”. What is behind this?

Anyone who enters the field of education exposes themselves to dialectical processes and thus to areas of tension. They are always caught up in the conflict between idealism and reality, for example, or between theory and practice.

In my opinion, the opposite of theory is not practice, but empiricism, or reflective practice.

This is professional experience, or so-called professional empiricism.

That is why I have always taught myself, both as director of the Lucerne Grammar School and as founding rector of the University of Teacher Education Zug. I wanted to combine theory and empiricism in everyday school life. This gives me the legitimacy to point out undesirable developments – based on goodwill towards the institution of school, but relentless in concrete matters.

“We do not educate ourselves alone and in a self-directed manner: Education does not come from a coach or learning guide. Education comes from a committed counterpart who inspires me, from a teacher.”

Dr Carl Bossard, educator

With Curriculum 21, children are reduced to their measurable abilities: fragmented, competence-oriented, intensive. What does that mean for childhood? How much would you like to be a pupil today?

I can't say, because I can't compare. I only know one thing: the tendency towards control and monitoring in the education system puts pressure on schools without resulting in better learning outcomes. This technocratic view misunderstands the nature of teaching.

And we sense something else: the knowledge and information society is in danger of losing education. Education is struggling today. What is in demand are skills that are professionally calculable, economically applicable and financially exploitable. The cold calculation of usefulness dominates and dictates. The idea of business efficiency has supplanted the idea of education. It is relevant as an economic factor and a “balance sheet indicator of human capital” – under the parameters of maximised profit. That seems to be the case, to put it bluntly.

According to the Swiss Headmasters' Association (VSLCH), teachers are no longer educators, but merely coaches and learning guides. What are the consequences of this?

Hegel coined the short definition of education as “finding oneself in others”. We do not educate ourselves alone and in a self-directed manner. We need a vital, present counterpart who guides us to ourselves and thus to thinking as an inner dialogue between me and myself. This does not come from a learning guide or coach

who assigns me work sheets, it comes from a committed counterpart who inspires me, from a teacher. I become autonomous through emancipation.

“Grades are in distress”: Should school grades be abolished, as demanded by Thomas Minder of the Swiss Headmasters' Association (VSLCH) and Dagmar Rösler, President of the Swiss Teachers' Association (LCH)? What is important about grades?

Are grades (in primary school) necessary? Talking about this is not easy and also sensitive. The topic is like a minefield; it tends to have negative connotations. Many want to abolish them. Grades are certainly in distress, but they also have their value. As a young teacher, I worked at a school that used a verbal assessment system: assessing learning performance with words. How I struggled to come up with a fair “description”. For hours! – knowing full well that words can hurt; numbers are more neutral.

In an appreciative environment, in an atmosphere that is tolerant of mistakes, grades are not the problem, as I have experienced, but a simple and easily understandable aid; grades provide clarity about current learning performance. Children want to know where they stand. That's all a grade can do.

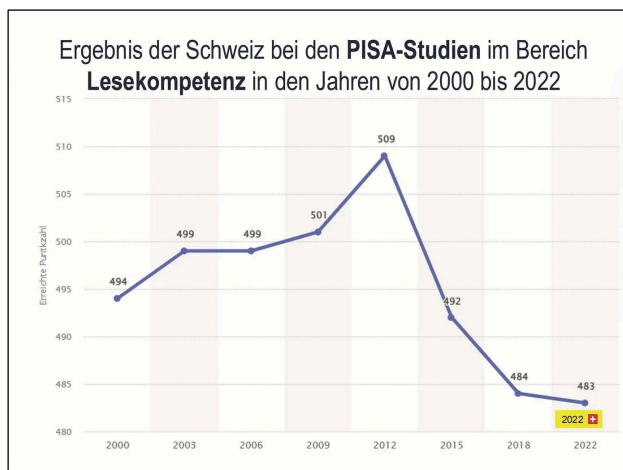
What is crucial is feedback that promotes learning – in the sense of articulating the difference between what is and what should be in relation to the subject matter, the process and self-regulation. This is an essential part of the grade. And it is precisely this, feedback on self-regulation, that learners want most. But they rarely receive it. Research proves this.

A taboo subject for many: according to the Federal Statistical Office, figures from the 2020-2022 survey period show that 55.9 per cent of 7-14-year-olds of school age have a migration background.² How does immigration to Switzerland affect teaching in primary schools?

This is a little-researched field. I can therefore only provide insufficient information. One thing we know for sure is that language is the instrument of thought. It is unacceptable for children from other cultures to be assigned to a class without understanding the German language. This does not help these children and at the same time makes teaching more difficult, to the detriment of the whole group.

You speak up for the pupils: “It’s not the pupils who have forgotten how to read – the reforms have systematically discouraged them from doing so.” What do you mean by that?

Practice has a bad reputation, especially at the universities of teacher education. But we know from memory research that practice, and consolidation are central to learning, that they are fundamental. This is especially true for the basic skills of arithmetic, reading and writing: the more we need something in daily life and under pressure, the more intensively we need to practise it, according to research. In other words: building on understanding, then consolidating through practice and application. We have neglected this. We know the consequences. The empirical data shows this very clearly.



[Switzerland’s results in the PISA studies in reading literacy from 2000 to 2022. On a downward slope: reading skills of pupils in Year 9, 2000–2022. (© Statista 2024; Image edited by Carl Bossard [“Bossard curve”])

Now, rampant reformitis seems to be leading even the reformers to the brink of disaster: in autumn 2025, universities of teacher education complain in the TA media³ about the decline in performance that their reform ideas have contributed to – and call for a “master plan” for primary schools. Are you with them?

We don’t need a new master plan, as a lecturer at the Zurich University of Teacher Education postulates in view of the declining learning performance of school leavers.

We need an educational turnaround to create a truly good “school for all” – intelligently managed and with effective learning processes.

This will enable schools to return to their core mission of providing effective education for all. This will prevent us from “walking blindly into a serious problem”, as the same education scientist warns in apocalyptic terms.

The universities of education are suddenly complaining about something that they themselves have contributed to with their reforms. But they are keeping quiet about that. That seems dishonest to me.

Who has the power in the Swiss education system? Who has the de facto power to define what should be taught and how it should be taught?

A small university-academic circle from the universities of teacher education – in conjunction with a strong education bureaucracy – has taken over the power to define schools. They determine what must be taught and, above all, how it must be taught – often against the wishes of practitioners. This means that practical empirics is being marginalised.

Universities of teacher education were only established in Switzerland in the mid-1990s. How have they been able to seize control over primary schools in just thirty years?

Universities of teacher education have succeeded in evading the control of the cantonal education authorities. They lead something of a life of their own. In doing so, they refer to decisions made by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK), which are often disconnected from the daily grind of educational practice. As we have already mentioned, this leads to a loss of significance of practice and empirical evidence.

You yourself bring Luhmann’s game of subsystems into play: schools are subordinate to politics. Where is the problem?

In Luhmann’s game of subsystems, schools are subordinate to politics. It must steer. In recent years, however, the education administration has gained unexpected influence through its forced and vigorous expansion. It is therefore not always clear who is steering whom. Officially, it would be education policies!

Can the primacy of politics or education policies over schools be regained in this country? What levers are available?

I am unable to provide a definitive answer to this question. It is to be hoped.

To what extent would you like to see a more active and agile Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education?

I'm not so sure about that. The function of the cantonal education directors (EDK) is not transparent enough for me. When I see how long it took for the sobering results of the *basic skills assessment* (ÜGK 2023) to be made public. The whitewashing, even euphemistic communication was more important than quick and relentless transparency of results!

A second example. The lack of clarity surrounding the EDK became apparent in late autumn 2023. The PISA results for 2022 were published. Finland, formerly an educational paradise, ranked slightly ahead of Switzerland in science and reading.

The Finnish Minister of Education described his country's results as "very worrying". He announced measures to be taken.

In Switzerland, the then President of the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education, Zurich Cantonal Councillor *Silvia Steiner*, rated the slightly poorer results as "good" to "very good". She emphasised the relative nature of the results, pointing to the even weaker performance of comparable countries such as Germany, and took comfort in this. "We are above the OECD average!" (sic!), she rejoiced. Yet we were aware of the dramatic decline in reading comprehension. Nothing has been done. This kind of thing undermines the credibility of this institution.

When cantonal governments and parliaments approve annual, i.e. recurring, global loans to universities of teacher education, they link them to performance mandates, usually in the form of creating teaching qualifications for teachers. Shouldn't these cash flows be linked to more specific performance mandates or guidelines for effective school practice? After all, he who pays the piper calls the tune, doesn't he?

I agree with you. We have too little transparency. It would also be a matter of a per capita comparison between the costs of the former teacher training colleges and today's training at universities of teacher education. It is not uncommon to hear people say that we have fallen behind the former teacher training colleges with today's academised teacher training.

Teachers work in the engine room of schools, fighting on the front line. What are their main concerns? To what extent are their expectations incorporated in a bottom-up approach – or not?

Science refers to this as marginalised professional empiricism. To give a concrete example: experienced teachers warned emphatically against the introduction of two foreign languages in primary schools and the lofty promises of this innovation.

Education policymakers and administrative staff did not listen to them. On the contrary. The practitioners were dismissed as stuck in the past.

Yet we have known for years that, for example, reading comprehension is declining dramatically, as is spelling and coherent writing. There is not enough time to practise. This is precisely what the warning voices from the field pointed out. They were – to put it mildly – ridiculed. Cassandra sends her regards! No bottom-up process. Unfortunately.

In the meantime, an entire "school reform industry" with lucrative business models has established itself: consulting firms are profiting from ongoing structural reforms with offerings such as "rethinking learning," "competence-oriented learning designs" and "post-digital pedagogy" to name just a few examples. How do you assess this development?

It's a tragic development. A lot of money can be made in and around education. Private individuals discovered this long ago and are pushing their way into schools. It's a lucrative field! It's often the same people who push for innovation and then promote themselves as consultants. For a lot of money, mind you.

Private schools are becoming increasingly popular in Switzerland. Is this impression misleading? What does the demand for private schools mean for local primary schools?

The number of private school pupils remains relatively stable at around five per cent. What is increasing, however, is the number of private learning and tutoring institutes. This is not surprising.

We know that even intelligent children often have large gaps in their basic arithmetic and writing and spelling skills at the end of primary school. When they do master these basics, it is often thanks to committed parents or private tutoring institutes. This should give those responsible for education food for thought.

A Google search for the keywords "tutoring, grammar school preparation, Zurich" yields a

long list of offers – not to mention the black and grey market for extra lessons. The demand must be high, otherwise this market would not exist. Schools are not fulfilling their core mission sufficiently.

On 17 January 2025, the St. Katharina girls' secondary school in Wil SG appeared before Switzerland's highest court. "Kathi" was dragged before the Federal Court by politicians who dislike the successful school, of which Federal President Karin Keller-Sutter is a graduate: Is the school's identification with Christianity problematic, its private sponsorship to be demonised, its gender segregation unacceptable?

A decision I couldn't understand, initiated by a political faction that is suspicious of high academic achievement and didactic reduction in teaching per se. These are the same circles that vehemently oppose streaming after primary school.

Reforms are not limited to primary schools; they have also affected vocational schools. In the new commercial training programme, subjects such as "accounting" or "bookkeeping" are no longer taught. Lessons take place in the "action competence areas" (HKB). How do you assess this system change?

The renowned developmental psychologist and vice-president of the Max Planck Society, Prof. Franz E. Weinert, warned against such collective subjects, which were promoted by Curriculum 21 and are now also being pushed through in the commercial education reform: "Subjects are indispensable as knowledge systems for cognitive learning. There is absolutely no reason for a heterogeneous mishmash of subjects," he emphasised. Learning psychologist Weinert cited project-based teaching as an exception, where real phenomena or problems in our world form the starting point for learning.

Vocational training is feeling the pull of grammar schools. How can the attractiveness of vocational training be maintained or even increased?

"It was only in the workshop that I learned to think." So says philosopher and trained motorcycle mechanic Matthew B. Crawford. For him, thinking comes from the hands. The hands, according to Crawford, are the external brain. And only grasping leads to understanding. This is exactly what craftsmanship enables, what voca-

tional training enables. And we know something else: there is a strong connection between thinking and doing. This is another aspect of the appeal of vocational training.

We need to do a better job of demonstrating the value of basic vocational training and the opportunities it offers in our permeable education system – in line with the principle of equal opportunities: every qualification leads to another opportunity.

Where is the grammar school heading with the reform project "Further development of the grammar school matriculation WEGM"? I ask you with your question: "Humboldt or McKinsey?"

In a nutshell, just one comment on a broad field. The "Framework Curriculum for Grammar Schools" speaks volumes. It reads like a mixture of a Council of Europe document, the text of a global education player and an AI-generated education text. Unfortunately, the answer is simple: McKinsey dominates! Wilhelm von Humboldt's educational idea takes a back seat. For many, he has long since been dead.

Neither constant reforms nor rigid stagnation serve the school well. With a view to further development: what criteria should future reform processes consider in view of the primacy of politics and relevance to school practice?

Schools and teaching are always children of their time. History teaches us that. And looking back shows us something else:

Schools have a dual mission. They must be contemporary and at the same time have the courage to remain constant. In concrete terms, this means that even in times of change, they must remain committed to what is universally valid and has no expiry date. This is where the contradictory and therefore demanding nature of schools lies, the dialectic: they must change and at the same time impart timeless values such as human values and basic cultural skills: the traditional as well as the progressive. Schools must combine both and do justice to both.

And how does today's school prepare children for tomorrow's world? A world that is subject to a previously unknown dynamic of civilisation and is undergoing a revolution. One thing is always demanded and postulated like a mantra: to prepare young people for flexible times, for a digitalised future shaped by artificial intelligence (AI), for an era in which people are constantly

changing careers and taking on new tasks. One of the figureheads of the present day is therefore the flexible person. The American sociologist *Richard Sennet* described this magic word, flexibility, in a lucid book.

But how does one become flexible in a world of constant change? In a world where hardly anything is constant and certain anymore.

Being able to do one thing properly is better than being mediocre at a hundred things. What the poet and thinker *Goethe* demanded in essence is what schools in the 21st century should demand: clear standards, a focus on basic knowledge and intensive training in skills that will always be valid: reading comprehension and coherent writing, precise arithmetic, logical thinking and free imagination.

Such elementary basic skills are the result of systematic learning and creative work, the result

of an uncompromising dedication to the basics. This is the only way to become flexible! "Get the fundamentals right, and the rest will follow." There is nothing more to add to that.

SICHTWEISENSCHWEIZ.CH would like to thank Dr Carl Bossard for this interview.

Source: <https://sichtweisenschweiz.ch/politik/wer-hat-die-definitionsmacht-ueber-die-schulen-uebernommen-die-folgen-sind-verheerend-carl-bossard-fordert-eine-wende/>, 10 November 2025

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ <https://www.heinrich-pestalozzi.de/werke/pestalozzi-volltexte-auf-dieser-website/1799-stanser-brief>

² <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bevoelkerung/migration-integration/nach-migrationsstatus.assetdetail.33348438.html>

³ <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/lesekompetenz-schweiz-jeder-vierte-jugendliche-scheitert-841555779367>